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Epiphany 6, Year C / Luke 6:17-26  
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Trinity Church in the City of Boston

### **The Plain Truth About Wealth**

There's a saying attributed to the great twentieth century theologian Karl Barth, and it goes something like this: preachers should step into the pulpit with a Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Such an undertaking, in this present age, should cause any preacher with good sense to tremble! What Barth actually said in that 1963 interview with *Time Magazine* was a bit more nuanced. The advice he offered was not to preachers, but to young theologians. And what he advised young theologians was this: "...take your Bible and take your newspaper and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible."<sup>1</sup>

This past week, a participant in our Zoom Bible study brought the Bible into conversation with a "newspaper" on his desk. As we studied Jesus' pointed words about wealth, he noted the headline adorning this magazine's cover: "Rich Men Rule the World." Later that day I investigated the magazine for myself and discovered how the title "Rich Men Rule the World" had been conceived. The editors made an eleventh-hour observation as they were putting the issue to bed. Having traversed the globe to document the wealthiest leaders in the technology industry, they realized that every single subject of their coverage was a man.

So the editor, a woman, issues this warning in the introduction: "It might be a rich man's world for now, but trust me, women like money too. And we're coming to

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<sup>1</sup> *Time*, "Barth in Retirement," *Time*, May 31, 1963, <https://time.com/archive/6831843/barth-in-retirement/>.

take some of yours.”<sup>2</sup> Now, in the Gospel of Luke, one of the most prominent motifs is the theme of *reversals of fortune*. But I’m not sure that women supplanting men in the line-up of tech billionaires is exactly what the evangelist had in mind!

To be clear, I’m not intending to single out this magazine. Its glamorization of wealth is hardly unique and simply serves to illuminate a core value of our culture. There are countless lists that extol wealth as the highest form of blessing. There’s *Fortune Magazine’s* Billionaire’s issue. *Forbes* list of the world’s richest families. The Bloomberg Billionaires index. Lists of colleges that produce the highest salaried graduates. There’s even a list of the world’s wealthiest religious organizations.

As news coverage emanates 24/7 from our smartphones, the power of wealth is on full display. In business. In politics. In education. It pervades every sphere of our lives as an idol. For the accumulation of goods it makes possible, for the access it provides us, and for the status it affords us. The story the world tells us, the story that shapes us, the narrative that forms our children, is that wealth is the path to glory. But, my friends, if we deign to read that story through the lens of today’s gospel, we discover that it is a lie. For “Jesus looked up at his disciples and said, Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus’ pronouncements of blessings are better known to us as the “Beatitudes.” The Beatitudes of Matthew’s Gospel comprise the opening of the world’s most famous sermon: the Sermon on the Mount. Luke’s Beatitudes – the ones we heard this morning

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<sup>2</sup> Katie Drummond, “Rich Men Rule the World,” *Wired*, January 13, 2025, <https://www.wired.com/story/editor-letter-rich-men-rule-the-world/>.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 6.20 (NRSVUE)

– come from the less famous Sermon on the Plain, so-called because instead of going up the mountain to preach, Jesus comes *down* the mountain to “[stand] on a level place.”<sup>4</sup>

For many, the Beatitudes serve as a Manifesto of the Kingdom of God. A perfect distillation of Jesus’ teaching. And while Matthew’s Jesus doles out nothing but blessings, Luke’s Jesus serves up a side dish of woes. Woes that are certain to make anyone with a brokerage account squirm in their pew. Indeed, can you imagine if we had chosen to hold our Annual Meeting *this* week? With *this* gospel passage alongside our review of our multi-million-dollar endowment? For a financially prosperous community, condemnatory words about wealth from the mouth of our Savior can be hard to hear, no matter what Sunday of the year they fall.

If these woes for the well-off and the well-fed manage to leave us convicted, they also leave us with this question: What are they convicting us to *do* exactly? Are they urgent moral exhortations? Is Jesus telling us to starve ourselves? Liquidate our assets? Is Jesus saying we must make ourselves poor to be good Christians? Far be it from me to discourage anyone from giving their money away, but I have it on good authority from more than one biblical scholar that the answer is, in a word, no. Or at least, not exactly.

We are quick to hear Jesus’ words as a rebuke. Admonishments goading us toward an impossible ethical ideal. With its language of blessings and woes, this passage activates our tendency to see the world in diametrically opposed binaries. Winners and losers. Good and bad. In and out. And when we turn these blessings and woes into a sorting exercise, our instinct to achieve and our penchant for self-striving takes over. We

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 6:17 (NRSVUE)

begin hatching a PowerPoint perfect strategy to land on Team Blessing! Only, the Beatitudes are not primarily about what we are to *do*, but what *is*.

The Beatitudes are *descriptive*, not *prescriptive*.<sup>5</sup> They are not a list of demands. The Beatitudes simply tell us the truth about the reign of God. That in the Kingdom of God, status and stature, riches and renown, cash and capital, are simply no currency at all. And if you're not yet convinced that this gospel is good news for you, I invite you to recall what Jesus did right before he preached this sermon. Luke tells us that "all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them."<sup>6</sup> Not just the ones who pushed to the front of the line. Not just the sickest. Not just the poor, the hungry and the weeping. Jesus healed *all* of them. By offering us these unvarnished descriptions of God's Kingdom, Jesus is not trying to send us into a shame spiral. Jesus is trying to heal us. To release us from the prisons built by false narratives about blessing. To teach us what it is to be truly blessed.

This gospel convicts me to share with you how and when I first understood these words to be good news. Just as I was beginning my senior year of seminary, I made the difficult but life-saving decision to take a medical leave of absence to seek treatment for alcoholism and addiction. Within a month, I found myself living in a halfway house halfway across the country in Minnesota. This institutional setting provided a safe and supportive environment so I could begin building the foundation of my sobriety. It also offered a generous helping of humility by giving a thirty-something year-old man a strictly enforced curfew and daily chores.

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<sup>5</sup> A reminder I take from the Rev. Fleming Rutledge, who has graced Trinity's pulpit on more than one occasion.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 6.19 (NRSVUE)

After a few months, I took a job as a server in a restaurant. I was a couple decades older than most of my colleagues, none of whom were the least bit impressed that I had once been a Senior Vice President in a bank or had half a degree in religion from Yale. I was simply a “worker among workers” and earned just enough money to cover my bills. In the literal sense of the word, I was not poor, nor was I hungry. But in the legal tender of prestige and status, I had never been so impoverished.

One day as I was riding the city bus to work, I was overcome with a profound sense of peace and contentment. An intense feeling of freedom and happiness like nothing I had ever known. It was the closest thing I’ve had to a transcendent experience. It was also the moment I comprehended what it is to be “blessed” in the biblical sense and the moment I really understood spiritual prosperity. A prosperity defined by the deep and abiding joy that comes from being rich in relationship with God.

Despite the story the world tells us, blessing cannot be measured by material possessions, corporate titles, prestigious degrees, or anything we can earn or achieve. To be blessed is to be stripped of the illusion that we can save ourselves. That any race we can win will rescue us. That any accolade we can strive for will make us whole. Indeed, to be blessed of God is to have nothing but God, and to realize that having God is everything.