

Luke 6:17-26

The song, “Only the Good Die Young,” by Billy Joel includes the following lyrics: “I’d rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints.” These words not only reflect the attitude of the world in which we live; they express the dark desires of our sinful flesh. What child has not inwardly rebelled upon hearing the words, “Good things come to those who wait.” And that rebellion stays with us through life. We don’t want to wait for good things; we want them now.

That’s why we roll our eyes at Jesus’ words: “Blessed are you who are poor... (but) Woe to you who are rich. Blessed are you who hunger now... (but) Woe to you who are well-fed now. Blessed are you who weep now... (but) Woe to you who laugh now. Blessed are you when men hate you and insult you... (but) Woe to you when all men speak well of you.”

And we wonder, “Why?” Does living the Christian life consist of denying ourselves every single day? Isn’t there a happy medium out there? Why can’t I take two “blesseds” and two “woes?” Or even three “blesseds” and just one “woe?” But it’s all or nothing. There is no middle ground. You’re not half-blessed and half-woed. It’s either “Blessed are you,” or “Woe to you.”

And sometimes we think maybe Billy Joel is right. Maybe this “Christian life” stuff isn’t worth it. Life would be a whole lot more “fun” if I was only a “part-time” Christian—coming to church only when I felt like it; serving God with my time and my money just now and then; keeping most of the commandments most of the time, but indulging my flesh every so often. Living as a Christian in a sin-filled world is a little like being a child in a toy store and being told, “You can look, but don’t touch!”

When Jesus spoke these words 2,000 years ago, it was common for the people of the world to indulge themselves with bountiful meals, laughter and merriment. These things are not wrong in and of themselves. The warning is against making them the chief thing in life.

Jesus is not saying that rich people who eat well and enjoy life are doomed in the hereafter. Nor is He saying that poor people who walk around hungry and depressed are blessed with eternal life. But...as you believe, so will you live. And...as you live, so will you believe. If I believe that Christ Jesus is the center of my life, I will strive by my living to reflect that. If Christ is not at the center for me, then my life will show it. And if I live as though this earth is my paradise, then what I believe in will be something other than Christ. But if I live looking for that home above which God, out of grace, will give me, then I am showing you my faith in Jesus by how I live.

As with every word in the Bible, these “blesseds” and “woes” are all about Christ. Dear Christian, if you are living now a life which is rich with everything but Christ—woe to you. If you hunger after making money and enjoying good times, but you don’t have much of a hunger for Christ and His Word—woe to you. If you feel no sorrow over your sinful life—woe to you. If others speak well of you because they can’t tell that you are a Christian—woe to you.

If, on the other hand, you are a beggar before God, seeking Christ's holiness, for you have none of your own—then blessed are you. If you hunger for Christ and His Word and Sacraments—blessed are you. If you mourn over your sinful life—blessed are you. If you are rejected by others because you live as a Christian—rejoice, for you are blessed by God.

Now quite honestly it's easy for us to look at the passing of someone like Anna Nicole Smith and say to ourselves, "Woe to her! For her life was not shaped by Jesus Christ." But how dare we notice the speck in another's eye and yet think nothing of the log in our own eye! Jesus didn't proclaim these woes so that you and I can go pointing our finger at those we think deserve them. I deserve them! Every one of them! And so do you!

If, upon hearing Jesus' words, I automatically put myself in the category of the "Blessed," then woe to me. For my sinful flesh hates Christ; it wants nothing to do with Him. And Jesus didn't speak these woes to "others;" He speaks them to me, so that I repent of my sin and throw myself on His mercy.

Whenever God speaks His Word of Law to us, the only response we can utter is "Woe to me, for I am a sinner, and I deserve every pain and woe that there is." When we confess our sins every Sunday morning, we are simply saying, "Woe to me. I am a poor, wretched, woeful sinner, and I deserve to be punished both now and forever."

But listen to this...when we say, "Woe to me," God says, "Blessed are you." Upon your confession, He commands His minister to turn toward you and say, "God forgives you. Jesus took away your pain and woe. Heaven is yours in Jesus Christ."

We might think that if anyone is "Blessed," it's Jesus. He is the "Blessed One" of His Father. But the good news for you is that Jesus became the "Woeful One" in your place. He suffered every woe that you and I had coming. A Good Friday hymn tells the story..."O Darkest Woe" we sing. But it's not your woe—it's Jesus. He endured it all. There isn't one pain and woe out there that Jesus did not suffer for you. And He wasn't thinking, "Good things come to those who wait." Rather, He knew that because of His suffering, good things would come to you. For you now are the "blessed ones." And it's not because of how we live. It's because of who you are in Christ. You don't have to strive to be "blessed." God, right now, declares you "blessed" for Jesus' sake.

When the Law tells you how woeful you are, run to your baptism. Jesus has washed away all your sins. In God's eyes there is nothing woeful about you. He calls you "blessed," for His Son, who died for you, gives you all good things in your baptism. In those waters a great exchange took place. Jesus took your "woes" and He gave you His "blesseds." Now perhaps that doesn't seem fair to Him—but that is not His concern. His only concern is to show mercy to you. And so He poured it on. As the water was poured over your head, His "blesseds" came to you. All of them. Every blessing that God has to give is now yours in Christ.

And you know...Jesus took your woes, not so that you can go off and indulge your sinful flesh, but so that you may live under Him in His Kingdom of Grace. Jesus didn't suffer all your pain and woe so that you can go live as a "part-time" Christian, but so that you can live as His forgiven child.

When loving parents adopt a child, they do so not so that the child can live a few days each week with them, and the rest of the time live out in the streets. They adopt him so that he can be a part of their family every day; so that they can love him and give him what he needs in life every day. God made you His child in your baptism so that you would belong completely to Him each and every day; so that He can bless you with His gifts in Christ Jesus always.

And so here you are in church this morning...God's child. Here is Christ for you. Here He blesses you in Word and Sacrament. And perhaps it is "easy" to believe that you are "blessed ones" here. But you know what happens each day out there. We rub shoulders with our neighbors in Augusta and Washington. Sometimes we have words with them. We're with our schoolmates and coworkers. Out there we're a child in a toy store with temptations all around us. And each night that we lay our head on our pillow, it might not be so clear to us that we are the "blessed" of God. Because every day we fail Him. Every day we live for ourselves. Every day we indulge our flesh. In here we are the "blessed ones" of God. Perhaps out there we're not so sure.

Friend, the way you live does not change who you are. Your life should reflect the fact that you are God's child, but we're still sinful, rebellious children, and every day that becomes obvious. And so take this to heart..."Blessed are you." Jesus died for every one of you. God forgives each and every one of you. Each and every day out there you are and remain God's "blessed ones," because you belong to Him in Christ Jesus. Amen.