

The Surprising Way to True Blessings

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Preacher: Mark Chew

[0:00] Now, many years ago, when I first came to Australia as a 17-year-old, the Aussies that we met were fond of telling us that their country was known as Down Under.

Yeah, I'm sure you still do that now. And that being Down Under, the Aussies then saw things differently. So they would pull out a map like this, Pong, if you could get to that map, where, you know, Australia would be where Mother England normally is, right up the top and in the middle.

They'll talk about celebrating Christmas in summer, shrimp on the barbie rather than roast turkey, although I've since found out there's no reason why you can't have turkey too, and ham.

But anyway, it's meant to be shrimp on the barbie. And the point is that Northern Christmas was all about snow, whereas ours is hot. They drank mulled wine.

We drink cold beer. And while they were huddled around their fireplace, we would be out in the sun playing cricket, sunbathing, and surfing. So there were many stories on how life as an Antipodean was different.

[1:15] Someone even mentioned that water went down the sink clockwise in Australia. It's true, actually. Whereas it spirals anti-clockwise if you're in the north.

And so with this upside-down view of the world, you know, our country isn't just down under, it's upside-down under. Which ought to make us great candidates, really, for Jesus' kingdom.

Because as we shall discover tonight in our passage, His is an upside-down kingdom. That is, the values in His kingdom are different to the world. It's inverted.

So that as His disciples, we are to look at life in a different way, an upside-down way, even. Now, as we've been looking and working through the Gospel of Luke, we've seen Jesus' kingdom growing, right?

He's been calling disciples like Simon and Levi, whom we also know by the name of Matthew. He's been calling them to follow Him. But tonight, as Luke begins our passage, Jesus is choosing a different set of people.

[2:23] Tonight, in verse 13, Jesus chooses among His disciples, 12 apostles. 12 people who are actually more than just disciples. These 12 are to replace the tribes, the 12 tribes of Israel, as the foundation of God's people.

By choosing them, Jesus signals that from now on, God's chosen people are to be found among Jesus' disciples. And these 12 disciples, or these 12 apostles, are to form the founding members of His kingdom.

They also have a very important task, that of being eyewitnesses to all that Jesus did, including, most importantly, to witness His death and resurrection. They will also hear every word He teaches, for then they had to hand them down to the next generation of disciples.

First, they did it in person, orally, and then through the written word, in the writing of the Gospels and the letters, which we now know as the New Testament, which is the foundational document of the Church, God's inspired and authoritative word.

And so, with such an important choice, it's no wonder then that Jesus stayed up all night, it says in verse 12, to pray before He made this decision.

[3 : 45] Now, just by way of comparison, let me ask you guys, which of you, those of you who are married, which of you have ever stayed up all night to pray before you proposed in marriage?

Which? Anyone? Michael? No. I didn't think you would. And neither did I, right? Not to say that it wasn't a serious decision, but it goes to show, actually, by comparison, how serious this is for Jesus.

And yet, if you look at those 12 names, you may be scratching your head over Jesus' choices. Because, honestly, these are a bunch of nobodies.

Simon, Andrew, James, and John, they're just fishermen. Matthew is a despised tax collector. Simon the Zealot, well, he's a lawless resistance fighter.

And Judas Iscariot becomes a traitor. No one was part of the Jewish elite. No one was a Pharisee, which, if you think about Jesus wanting to start a new religion, you would have thought you'd choose someone with some theological training or knowledge.

[4 : 59] It's a bit like having the Australian cricket captain coming down to the local Doncaster team, and then he chooses for his opening batsman from that local team.

He picks the guy with the dodgy knee to be his wicket keeper, and the guy with the bad back, well, he's going to be the pace bowler. This is sort of how the choice of the twelve looks like, doesn't it?

And yet, what Jesus is communicating with this choice is that these are the ones to whom the kingdom belongs. Jesus is saying that if fishermen and tax collectors can be founding members of the kingdom, then anyone can be part of the kingdom.

You don't have to be a respected Jew to be in Jesus' kingdom, not a learned teacher either. Instead, his kingdom is for the sinner and the outcast. And in fact, if you think about it, it might even be easier for the prostitute to be in his kingdom rather than the Pharisee, the tax collector rather than the teacher of the law.

And that's because the prostitute and the tax collector are more likely to realize that they're not good enough to be in his kingdom. That it's not by merit that they enter, but rather by coming to Jesus as a repentant sinner rather than a righteous saint.

[6 : 22] And so, if anyone here tonight thinks they're not good enough for God's kingdom, then that's exactly the attitude that Jesus wants of us. Whatever your past, however many wrongs you've done, nothing stops you from entering his kingdom.

All it takes is humble repentance. And Jesus will welcome you with open arms. So, can I please urge you, don't let anything stop you.

Don't let regret or shame about your life stop you from coming to Jesus. His kingdom isn't for the rich or the powerful, those who think they deserve God's favor.

No, his kingdom is for the poor and the needy, those who see their need for Jesus in order to get right with God. And as we look at the second point, that's exactly what we see when we look at Jesus' sermon.

Here, Jesus gives us further key insights into his kingdom and into the values that governs its working. Now, many people call this the Sermon on the Plain in contrast to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount.

[7 : 27] And that's because in verse 17, after he appoints his disciples or apostles, Jesus went down with them and stood on a level place. By contrast, Matthew records Jesus going up a mountain to deliver a very similar sermon.

Now, does this mean that these are two separate incidents or are they still part of the one? I don't know. After all, this could be a level clearing somewhere up the mountain. At the end of the day, it probably doesn't really matter.

Nor do the minor differences in the two sermons. Both are actually summaries of important teachings by Jesus. And so, Jesus could have taught these on more than one occasion.

What I want to focus on tonight, though, is the details which Luke provides for us in this sermon. So, notice, for instance, the large crowd which gathered. It says, great numbers from across Israel were coming to him.

Not just to hear him, but to be healed as well and cured of their evil spirits. I think Luke here is painting a picture of people in great need. people pressing in desperate to touch Jesus.

[8 : 38] Because, verse 18, it says, power was coming from him and healing them all. I think that Jesus, as he was doing that, it would have been very hard for him not to have been moved.

Which is why I see, I think you see that little detail in verse 20 where Luke says that he looks at them intently, lovingly, as he begins his sermon in verse 20.

So, Jesus says, 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.

Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude and insult you and reject your name as evil because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy because great is your reward in heaven.

For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets. Now, I think the Pharisees were there as well not to listen to Jesus but to try and catch him out.

[9 : 43] So, the next few verses I think are for them. Verse 24, Do you notice each wall is actually mirrored by the blessing, isn't it?

but only in a reversed way. Now, consider first the verses on being in need. So, that's verses 20 and 21 and 24 and 25. Now, if you're familiar with Matthew's sermon, then you'll see that unlike Matthew, Luke doesn't spiritualize these verses.

Now, what do I mean by that? Well, look at the same verses in Matthew's gospel on the slide. Matthew talks about the poor in spirit and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

On the other hand, Luke doesn't have any qualifiers here, does he? And not because he's only concerned for the materially poor or the physically hungry. Rather, Luke sees that Jesus is speaking about all poverty, whatever its form.

And I think Jesus isn't talking about every poor person here but those who, being poor, see their need for Jesus. You get the distinction? Not just if you're poor but if you're poor and see your need for Jesus.

[11 : 13] After all, these are the ones, the ones he's speaking to are the ones that have come to him for healing, to be freed from their suffering. They know that they're in need. And by contrast, conversely, the rich and the well-fed in verse 24 aren't cursed simply because they've got stuff.

But because, as Jesus says in verse 24, they've already found their comfort in their riches. They're not only rich but they actually look to their riches for their comfort.

They're the ones that are standing back as it were, the Pharisees, and thinking, yeah, I'm too good for this. I can hear what you're saying, Jesus, but I'm better than all of what you're asking of me.

They're the ones whose good life has actually blinded them from their moral poverty. They've been blinded from their captivity to sin, from their life of spiritual darkness.

And so, because they see no need of Jesus, they've actually missed out on the true blessing in life, that of belonging to God's kingdom. And we sort of see this today, don't we?

[12:26] Look around us, often it's the most successful people in life, whether it's at work or at school, that find it the hardest to see their need for God.

For to do that would be to admit weakness, wouldn't it? They've got to where they are by sheer hard work, by talent, by their charisma. So why do they actually need to rely on God?

On the other hand, the poor and the hungry and the sorrowful, they're the ones more likely to realize their need for God and turn to Him for help. And when they do, they find a God whose nature is to lift them up, to welcome them, to rescue them into His kingdom.

That was why we had the first reading tonight in Psalm 113, which showed us that even though God sits and thrown on high is to be praised above all else, yet it says in verse 5, He stoops down to us and raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap He seats them with princes and He settles the barren woman in a home.

Someone without child is now a happy mother of many children. And so, while being poor isn't a blessing in itself, what it does is provide the opportunity for a gracious God to come and bless the poor person.

[13:49] God has already done that in the fullest measure by sending His Son, Jesus, who has died in our place, to take away the penalty for our wrongdoing.

And so now, in Him, if you're a Christian, we find all we need in life, not just for the physical things like food and shelter, but for the spiritual and eternal things as well, like forgiveness, like the power to live a pleasing life for Him.

It's all encapsulated in that phrase, yours is the kingdom of God. Yours is the kingdom of God. All the kingdom's riches, the joy, the peace, the loving relationship that we have with God is now ours through Christ Jesus.

That's amazing, isn't it? We have God's kingdom so that even if we remain materially poor because God doesn't make promises about giving us riches in that regard, yet we are rich in the fullest sense of the word because we belong in God's kingdom.

Now, if this is the first time you've heard this, then I'm sure you'll find that this is a really upside-down way of thinking, of looking at life. This is not how the world defines blessing, is it?

[15:06] I mean, you just need to drive down a leafy street in Turek and then when you see a mansion like this, have you got a mansion? Pretty good.

Or one like this? What would you think? Is the first thing that comes to your mind, woe to the owners for they are rich?

Is that what we think? I rather doubt it. Instead, we think, oh, well, they must have made it in life. They've arrived at the top of society's ladder. And that's how we think, don't we, as a society?

Blessing is about moving from a lower-paid job to a higher-paid job. It's from moving to a smaller house to a bigger house. From a poorer neighborhood to a richer one.

And yet, Jesus is asking us as his disciples not to think like that, but to think in an upside-down way. Not to think automatically that material riches means blessing.

[16:07] So, for instance, don't look with pity on our Christian brothers and sisters in poor countries. Don't. Because they may actually be more blessed than we are.

They may have the blessing of a rich faith of knowing how to depend daily on the Lord. Every meal they eat, every day that they pass living in safety, they depend on the Lord for that.

Well, we do as well. But how often do we thank God for those things? By contrast, we have all the first world luxuries, don't we? But so many of us struggle with contentment, with anxiety, even in our material riches.

It's almost as if we've forgotten how to learn how to trust in God for all things, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual. Now, I'm not saying that by all this that the thing to do then is to sell everything and then go and live in a bedside.

No. Remember, Jesus is speaking to those who are already poor and warning those who think they are rich. So the issue is not about changing your life circumstances so much as changing the way we respond to them.

[17:21] So if, for instance, you find yourself in need, let's say you've lost your job, or maybe you didn't quite get that ATAR for that uni course you wanted, well, rather than think you've been punished by God, that, you know, woe is you, consider perhaps that this is God's blessing, that here's an opportunity for you to trust God more, to grow in faith, to experience firsthand God's comfort and strength.

And what about the opposite, the converse? What happens if you suddenly find yourself rich or you experience success in life? Well, for a start, let's be thankful to God because He provides all things.

But then let's also heed Jesus' warning and see the dangers of being rich and realize that if we're not careful, these very successes can become curses.

That woe is us when we start to think that we no longer need God, that we can trust in these things or we can trust in ourselves instead. Don't always equate riches with blessing.

and difficulty with curses. God may be using it for very opposite intentions. All right, let's turn now to the last few verses, verses 22 and 23, and then again in verses 26.

[18:45] Here, Jesus speaks of the particular trial that comes to only Christians, that of being persecuted for following Jesus. So, read with me verse 22.

Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leave for joy because great is your reward in heaven.

For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets. Again, Jesus mentions the converse in verse 26. Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you. For that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

Now, I know there's a lot of attention currently on bullying, especially at schools, and of, you know, talk about discrimination, whatever form it takes. Now, these are serious issues in our society and the fact that they exist, I think, is a sad thing and, you know, we should work to try and alleviate that.

But although there may be some application here for those situations, Jesus isn't talking about bullying or discrimination here in general. No.

[19:51] Rather, Jesus speaks specifically about being mistreated because we're following Jesus. The phrase there, Son of Man, in verse 22, is a reference to Him. And it's because of Him that people are being persecuted.

And if you read the verses carefully, Jesus speaks not of if, but when. It's not if you are persecuted, but when you are persecuted.

Because as Christians, we are to expect that the world, that is those people who reject Jesus, will also reject those who follow Him. And so while as Christians we pray for religious freedom, we mustn't hang our hopes on it.

There may come a day when we may have to be a Christian without those freedoms. Jesus' values are so different to the worlds so inverted that if we truly wish to live by them, they will clash with the worlds.

Sooner or later, how we live, the truth that that communicates, will rub up against the world's values. And the world won't thank you for showing them up. They won't.

[21 : 01] It happened with Jesus and the Pharisees. And if it happened to Him, it will happen to His followers as well. In fact, Jesus says here that it's actually happened since the Old Testament.

For that was how God's prophets were treated. What was the role of the prophet? Well, his role was to speak God's truth, wasn't it? To expose the people's sin and call them to repentance as the only way back to God.

But because the people were hard-hearted, they were stubborn, they refused to repent and they persecuted the prophets instead. If that is what they did to the prophets, Jesus says, that is what will happen to us as well.

And I think here in the West, in Australia, we will find it harder and harder to be open about our faith without facing persecution. some of you may have been on Facebook or whatever, but you've seen one indication, haven't you?

That reaction this week to the Bible Society's video of two people trying to have a sensible discussion about same-sex marriage. They got hounded for it and Coopers as well got boycotted.

[22 : 09] They're beer. So admitting your Christian faith, I think it's going to be seen more and more as a liability at work, at school. it will have, it will risk your career.

It may risk your status in society. I'm speaking humanly, of course, in terms of status. It's not an easy choice, is it? You know, I'm no longer, as it were, working in the city, but I can see how difficult it is.

It's not easy. But at the end of the day, no matter how hard it is, we need to decide whether we'll simply go along with the world's values, even be like the false prophets that tell people what they wanted to hear so that the world will speak well of them, in verse 26, Jesus says.

Will we decide to do that when the going gets tough? Or will we suffer the insults and exclusion because we want to be faithful to God's kingdom? Now, I know that for some of you, the issue is even closer to home because the pressure is not coming from society as such, but it's actually coming from your own family members.

They object to you becoming a Christian. But again, I say this to you, although it's challenging, what are you going to decide? To be faithful to God's kingdom or to hear what people want to say?

[23 : 36] Now, I think Jesus understands all this. Don't, you know, don't hear Jesus as being unsympathetic to our situation because he himself was persecuted for what he did, for what he said.

He was persecuted where all he wanted to do was save people. And yet, Jesus does not withhold, does not mince his words, does he?

So just look with me again at verse 26. No, actually verse 22. What does he say? He say we are to, this is hard, isn't it? Rejoice on that day and, wait for it, leap for joy.

Now, I don't know how that strikes you, but as a Christian of more than 30 years, I think that's still pretty confronting. Because Jesus is not saying, oh, you know, protest the injustice of it.

No. He's not even saying suffer in silence. No. He's saying rejoice and leap for joy. Leap for joy like it's the best thing that's ever happened to you. Now, how do we even begin to come to terms with this sort of instruction?

[24:42] To think that we should welcome persecution in our lives. I think the only thing that makes sense is when we then see the next sentence where he promises that when we do that, great is our reward in heaven.

The reward in heaven must be so great that it overwhelms even the deepest persecution we face in this life. And because Jesus himself faced that sort of persecution and did not flinch from it, I know, I know that what he promises must be true.

When we align our name with Jesus and we are maligned for it, then whatever riches Jesus himself has in heaven, that will be ours as well when we get there.

And it's this hope that I think Jesus wants us to focus on whenever it gets tough. That is what it's meant to help us to face persecution.

Well, let me wrap up. Friends, if you didn't know already, this is one of the very key things that we need to realize about the Christian life.

[25:56] And that is, to be a Christian, we have to respond to Jesus' call to live this upside-down way of life. We are called to look at life differently to the world, to reject worldly power and riches as fake blessings.

Instead, we are to see the poverty and the hunger that we may come across, that we may suffer, as surprising ways to true blessing. because it teaches us to rely fully on God, to trust in Him.

The Christian life is not meant to be rosy. If someone tells you, say something like that in order to get you to become a Christian, don't believe it. We must expect persecution just like Jesus did.

And yet, we take great joy in it because it's the way to true reward and blessing. God will give us the strength to do it. We're not going to be alone. He gives us His Spirit. But we need to make that choice whether we will live this way, even though it gets challenging and difficult, or we would live the easy way.

If you don't get that clear in your mind, you'll actually find the Christian life pretty frustrating and confusing because you keep thinking that God is punishing you when actually He means to bless you.

[27:15] or you may be chasing things that you think are God's blessings, material things, when actually that is going to lead you into trouble. So yes, this is a totally upside down way of looking at life.

Upside down to what the world thinks. But it's actually the right way. Just like Australians being down under is the right way. Because it's God's way. And so it's the way to true reward.

And surprising though it is, it is the way to true blessing. Let's pray. Father, we ask you to strengthen us with this difficult message.

We probably look at it and go, I don't know how I'm going to do it. When I turn up at school tomorrow, at work tomorrow, I don't know how I'm going to be able to stand and, yeah, suffer for the sake of Jesus.

if we're going through a difficult time now, being sick, being in need, this may be a difficult thing for us to go through right now.

[28:26] And yet, Lord, we want you to, by your spirit, help us to see our life, to see this world as you see it. To understand that we can trust in you because you have our best welfare at heart.
because you've promised to us that yours is the kingdom of God. We pray and ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. thing.