

Bible study: Up, in, out

Reading: Luke chapter 6 verses 12-26 (concentrating verses 12-20)

Introduction

This passage charts the build up to the way that Luke describes Jesus talk about what we call “the beatitudes”, an unusual set of blessings. In Matthew, where we usually read them in chapter 5, Jesus begins his most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, with these phrases beginning with “blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”. My understanding is that Jesus spoke in this way a lot, and that Matthew and Luke record two occasions of Jesus teaching in different contexts. If you look at the two passages there are two major differences. What Matthew records is slightly spiritualised and made general, whereas what Luke records is straight forwardly physical and applied directly to the people Jesus is speaking to.

Eg Matthew “blessed are the poor *in spirit*”, Luke “blessed are you who are poor”

Luke then records a set of “woes” to balance the “blessings”. There may be a reason that we prefer Matthew’s version especially in the Western world but that is another bible study! Much has been made of comparing the two versions, and quite rightly trying to understand what Matthew and Luke are trying to tell us about Jesus and his message in this comparison. That is also another bible study!

Just for this study, lets note two things:

1. On the whole they two sets of beatitudes are very similar, and if you forget that you have heard them so many times before; they are very surprising.
2. The prominent place of the beatitudes in both Gospels in terms of who Jesus is speaking to and when. In Matthew they are the beginning of a long sermon to Jesus’ disciples along with a large crowd presumably including some Jewish religious leaders based on the content. In Luke it is the first but of Jesus teaching after appointing the 12 disciples and calling them apostles (Simon/Peter, James, John and Levi the tax collector are called in the previous chapter), but again is spoken to a large crowd.

So these surprising sayings about what blessing looks like in the Kingdom of God seem to be prominent introductions and tone setters for Jesus speaking about the Kingdom of God. Jesus speaks about them after he has left his family home and family business, giving away the material and relational security and some of his identity as a carpenter/builder. As what we might call a sofa surfer, he is now speaking the language of fishermen and tax collectors (and has already been criticised for eating with sinners). There is a powerful context to Jesus proclaiming “blessed are the poor (in spirit)”.

Question: in what ways do you think Jesus life and actions help us understand the beatitudes?

Jesus relationships

Read Luke 6:12-20 again.

Try to describe all the relationships in Jesus life at this time. Feel free to use some imagination, or look back at the context further. Try to build up a picture together.

Try to resist turning the page until after you have done this – you may come up with something far more profound!

(A small warning: as I have picked out a very specific set of verses from the middle of a chapter there is a danger of reading too much in to them when I should have asked you to read the whole of Luke. But anyway...)

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God (up)

The first relationship within the passage is between Jesus and God the Father. Take a look at how long Jesus spent.

Questions – what do you think Jesus spent the time doing? What do you think the purpose of spending this time was?

Now go through your answers to the purpose of spending this time, and discuss how you would achieve the same purpose.

(If one of your answers was not something like ‘developing intimacy and relationship with God’ then please add it to the list!)

Disciples (in)

Jesus chooses his new family at this point – 12 people to share his life most closely with for the next 3 years. There are other disciples, followers, friends, people with questions, people trying to trick him or simply oppose him. If we look outside of this passage, we find that he often takes these people aside and shares his life fully with them. As we go on, 3 of them become more of an inner circle. (to me this is why Gethsemane becomes such a painful story – after all this time they fall asleep when Jesus needs them to just be there).

Jesus goes from relationship with Father God to relationship with his closest friends who he hopes will share his life and values. This can be seen as our relationship with our church family. (note: I realise that relationships between Christians and churches in Derby is way more fluid than this, which is a great thing. Don’t get too distracted by this)

Questions – try to paint a picture together of what life with Jesus and the 12 looked like? What was the purpose of all of this? What could this tell us about our relationships as a church family?

The crowd (out)

Jesus then addresses the crowd. Many of them will be his disciples or are seeking to be. He has already had two arguments with Pharisees/teachers of the law over eating with sinners and picking corn on the sabbath so you would expect them to also be in the crowd even though Jesus directs the beatitudes to his disciples.

(note: the OT law has a beautiful detail that when harvesting the fields, farmers should leave a bit around the outside so the poor and strangers in the land can eat. So the criticism is not that they are stealing the corn but that they are picking it on the sabbath. Obviously better to starve than do that! But Luke may also be telling us this so that we know that Jesus and his disciples are recognised as being ‘poor’)

Jesus goes from relationship with Father God, to relationship with 12 disciples/apostles to relationship with the crowd. This can be seen as our neighbours (everybody we ever meet) who will be a great mixture of people who believe, are seeking, are opposed, or somewhere in between these lines!

Questions – try to paint a picture together of what life was like between Jesus and the huge variety of people he met outside of the 12. What was the purpose in this? What could this tell us about our relationships with our ‘neighbours’?

Up, in, out: simple conclusion!

If Jesus relationships with Father God, disciples and the crowd were different but equally balanced (he seems to pattern his life to agape love all three) and these can be described broadly as loving relationships which are up, in and out – to what extent do we copy this example in our individual lives and as a church family?