

Rev. Dr. Gary Shahinian  
Sermon  
February 9, 2014  
Park Congregational Church  
Worcester, Massachusetts

### “Reversal of Misfortune”

Scripture Text: Luke 6:17-26

Dear people of God, Mahatma Gandhi said, “There is more than enough money in the world to meet human need; there is not nearly enough money to meet human greed.” When asked how much money was enough to satisfy him, John D. Rockefeller, Sr., at that time the wealthiest American, replied, “just a little bit more.” It is said that money cannot buy happiness, but too many of us would like the opportunity to prove it to ourselves.

Our Sermon Lesson this morning confronts us with claims by Jesus that seem oddly contrary to our experience. Jesus challenges a mindset of values and priorities captive to a desire for more and more. Those for whom riches are the driving priority can never be satisfied. They will always want “just a little bit more.” The reason for this is that they don’t appreciate what they already have. God wants us to be appreciative above all else, to be grateful for the good things we have in life. That’s

the big temptation in being rich. It's a greater temptation for those who did not earn their wealth, but by the luck of the draw inherited it, married into it, or won it in a lottery. But it's a temptation for everyone who is rich regardless of how they came about their riches.

Jesus always seeks to meet the needs of his audience. Many of those who sought to hear his words were poor persons, people whose lives were full of grief, those who were victims of misfortune. Jesus responds to these people in a most unexpected manner. He declares to them that, contrary to outward appearances, they are blessed, they have been given divine favor, they are accepted into God's kingdom. This Sermon on the Plain by Jesus begins with a promise of salvation. It focuses on the poor, because it is precisely those who have nothing to offer who can hear the promise of coming salvation, namely, God's kingdom breaking forth into the world.

This kingdom is spiritual, but it's also material, let's have no doubts about that. God's kingdom deals with this physical world. It's relevant to our concrete experiences in life. God cares about every aspect of our lives, about our possessions, about our values, about how we spend our time. The kingdom of God embraces all our activities. It's not

characterized primarily by decent deportment and pious principles, but encompasses what many would call the secular sphere of life, such as economics, entertainment, science, and all that which is involved in forming a culture.

Jesus's preaching about the kingdom attracts those from different places and backgrounds. Not just the Jews, but the residents of Tyre and Sidon--Gentile areas--people considered enemies of the Jews, take the time and effort to follow Jesus and listen to what he has to say. Many come to hear Jesus because they want to "get real," "get a life," and "get a future." Jesus speaks to these human needs in this Sermon on the Plain. But "get real" for Jesus means quite the opposite of what most today would call reality. "Get a life" for Jesus suggests something altogether different from what most today would call living. "Get a future" for Jesus indicates something completely unlike what most today would consider to be a hereafter. Jesus proclaims that the truly blessed are the poor and destitute, the hungry and the weeping, the hated and the excluded because of their choice to follow him. Talk about a reversal of values! Why would anyone willingly endure those hardships? Why would Jesus call such people blessed?

Jesus understands that the problem with most people is that they hide from reality, they are in constant search for a life, and they despair over their future. Very often a main obstacle for these people is their wealth. People put on airs with what their money buys them. They try to make themselves feel more important than they really are through the accumulation of possessions.

In the British sitcom, *Keeping Up Appearances*, social-climbing snob Hyacinth Bucket, excuse me, boo-KAY, desperately and continually looks for opportunities to climb the social ladder by attempting to impress people, especially the rich, and portray herself as more affluent than she really is. We laugh at Hyacinth, but many of us are like her. We try to impress people with money. Or we somehow think that our financial status is an accurate indication of whether God approves of us or not.

But very often what happens is that these people, like Hyacinth, become blind to their own illusions about themselves. To such people Jesus says, "Get real." People think that their money will buy for them a wonderful and happy existence. They try to establish a life for themselves through their money. But the result is frequently a relentless pursuit of one amusement after another. To such people Jesus says, "Get

a life.” People trust their money to provide for them a secure future. They carefully plan their entire future in terms of what their money will buy for them. But the outcome of all their careful planning is constant worry about whether they will ever have enough money to live comfortably. Some of these people are only in their 20's and 30's. How sad that they have already mapped out their retirement years. To such people Jesus says, “Get a future.”

The poor who are pronounced blessed by Jesus are privileged because they are the recipients of God's special gifts. Despite outward appearances, God is for them, not against them. The poor at that time were those who were generally tillers of the soil or small tradespeople. They tended to observe the spirit of Israel's religion more faithfully than the rich, elite urban dwellers. These agrarian Israelites became models of the faithful. They were the meek who shall inherit the earth. That doesn't mean that they were doormats, allowing others to step on them and take advantage of them, but rather, they submitted themselves to God for the purpose of carrying out the tasks of the kingdom. Unlike many of the rich in the privileged classes, they resisted the temptation to gain wealth through disobedient practices. The nature of the poor's work

would prevent many of them from carrying out the detailed religious temple observances stressed by the Sadducees, who were often men of great wealth who had leisure time for such religious duties. The poor were often victims of oppression, and had only God to help them for rescue or hope. That's why Jesus had a special compassion for them, those who were not only economically deprived of material goods, but those who recognized their dependence upon God. Thus the poor are pronounced by Jesus as the favored recipients of the new realm breaking forth into the world.

Jesus assures those in his day that God's favor doesn't depend on external fortunes. The prevalent belief that the quality of a person's morality could be determined by looking at that person's wealth, health, and success, was radically challenged by him. It would have been unthinkable for Jesus to say to someone in misfortune, "You must not be living right." On the contrary he had the greatest concern for those who were victimized the most by misery, injustice, and misfortune. To those persons, Jesus says, "Your reward is great." Not that they are to do good only because they expect a reward. Rather their experience of God's presence among them, despite their misfortunes, demonstrates that they

are on the right path, the path of righteousness, the path that leads to the divine kingdom, the path that leads to God's endorsement.

Most of us, I suspect, are rather comfortable with our lives. We may not like everything about the circumstances of our existence, but over the years we have come to accept things and to adjust ourselves to the way things are. That's nothing new. It's simply human nature. The people who gathered that day to hear Jesus teach, even his disciples, had a rather good understanding of the circumstances of their existence. They understood the difference between the "haves" and the "have nots," and they certainly knew it was a lot better to be among the haves! That's why these words of Jesus were so revolutionary. Probably what attracted people to Jesus was that he so often went against the common wisdom, against common sense. The way things are in this world is not the way that things are supposed to be in the kingdom of God. Hearing Jesus talk must have been like seeing the world turned upside down, as Jesus pointed out that in God's kingdom, the values of this present evil world are reversed.

In 1991, a book was published titled, *The Day America Told the Truth*. It was written by James Patterson, who went on to become a

famous novelist. The book offered data on a major survey of American attitudes and values at that time. One of the most interesting findings is that when asked if they could change one thing about their lives, fully 64% responded that they want to be rich. Wealth was far and away the top answer; the desire to be a “better person” didn’t even record enough responses to make the top 15 on the list! In fact, 7% of the respondents said that they would kill a stranger for \$10,000,000. This survey represented a cross-section of all Americans, a country in which 85% at that time claimed to be Christians. Let’s hope those 7% were among the 15% who did not identify as followers of Jesus Christ. It’s likely that a similar book in Jesus’s time, perhaps something titled, *The Day Israel Told the Truth*, would have recorded a similar result. The desire for wealth is not an exclusively modern priority.

Yet Jesus says that in the kingdom of God, priorities are inverted. The pursuit of wealth and material advantage over others has no place. Persons who live with the urgency to accumulate possessions violate the oath of citizenship in God’s kingdom. They will never be able to enjoy the abundance of life as members of the community of God’s people. Whatever material possessions we hoard for ourselves, we will ultimately

lose; whatever we give to God's kingdom, however, is multiplied beyond our wildest dreams.

Martin Luther King had a vision of this kingdom in his poem, titled "One Day." King's poem goes like this:

One day, youngsters will learn words they will not understand.  
Children from India will ask:  
What is hunger?  
Children from Alabama will ask:  
What is racial segregation?  
Children from Hiroshima will ask:  
What is war?  
You will answer them.  
You will tell them:  
Those words are not used any more  
like stage coaches, galleys or slavery  
Words no longer meaningful.  
That is why they have been removed from dictionaries.

Do we, like King, long for that day when words like hunger, segregation, and war are removed from dictionaries because they're no longer meaningful? Jesus offers us such a hope. "Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the hated, for theirs is the kingdom of God." They will be able to appreciate life's good things because they do not experience them in the present. Amen.