

Bizzaro Christianity

By Rev. Jonathan A. Malone

Preached at the Lower Merion Baptist Church

Sunday, February 11, 2007; Bryn Mawr, PA

Luke 6:17-26

“Blessed are you who...”

Movement 1 – Are We Blessed?

“Blessed are you who...” Sit up and listen to this statement, because it might be you! Sit up and pay attention, because you may be the lucky, blessed individual. “Blessed are you who...” Pay close attention because this isn’t the Southern double speak of ‘bless his heart’ which may or may not be a good thing. This isn’t just an off the cuff statement. This is serious, this is for real, “blessed are you who...”

Now maybe you’re wondering – what! Who, what! Maybe you are wondering, “Am I blessed, is it me?” Blessed are you who... wait for it...wait for it...wait for it... and then ask, “who?”

We live with this wondering if we are blessed, if we are someone special and if we have something to offer to the world. When you see that one person who has the winning smile, who knows all the answers, who walks with a sense of confidence maybe you wonder if you have anything to offer next to this person. Maybe you wonder if you can be considered a decent person next to this Adonis. Maybe you wonder if you have anything at all of worth; maybe you wonder if you are blessed.

It is we are at times like a group of insecure adolescents, hovering around the grown-ups looking for some kind of affirmation, some kind of acknowledgement, and some kind of compliment. We want to know that we are blessed.

Think of the individual who has received every bad rap possible. He has lost his job. His family has left him. His health is failing. When driving to get is unemployment check he rear-end the back of a police car. Things pile up on him, weighing him down and he wonders if he indeed has any value or any worth at all, or if God just sees him as someone insignificant and worthless. He wonders if he is blessed.

Have you ever felt that way? Either through circumstances or through your own personality have you ever looked at yourself and asked, “Am I blessed?” It is a question of worth, of self-esteem and of blessing. Christ is saying, “Blessed are you who...” and we desperately want to know, “Is it me? Am I blessed?”

Movement 2 – The World’s Blessings

The world has specific standards about worth and about blessings. The world tells us what to look for if someone is indeed a “worthwhile” or important person, or if that person is blessed. These tend to be external things that we look for. Money, clothes, the car you drive, the home you live in, and so on and so on are all external indications of what the world considers to be blessings. I remember when I was working in a different church as an associate pastor, there was one couple in the church who had a lot of money and made sure that people knew that they had a lot of money. I remember the senior pastor telling me that we had to make sure that they were attended to, taken care of and given priority because they were, “important” people. I thought everyone in the church was “important” but apparently those with money were more important. Everyone thought that because of their external possessions, they were blessed.

Or in the movie *Aladdin*, the main character (of the title’s name) felt very strongly that the only way for him to be noticed and to be considered important was to have money and a kingdom. His sense of worth was based on the external; it was based on the things that he had. Only when the genie gave him wealth did he consider himself blessed.

This is the paradigm that we are taught and in which we are swimming in this culture. Look at the ways we treat people in our society. The sports heroes are seen as more important than our teachers, based on the pay scale. Popular musicians are treated as more important than nurses and social workers, based on the rewards of

the world. Let's be honest about this. If the standards of society dictate that the person with the most money is the most important, then when we pay an athlete or a musician a large amount of money, and those who are such an essential part of the health of our society so little, what are we saying about importance? Who does our society suggest is truly blessed?

Or let me ask you another question, when would you say that you are "blessed?" Let's just move from culture to our own assumptions. When would you say that things are going well for you? When do you use the word "blessed?" A church that is growing by the hundreds is "blessed." A church that has a large amount of resources is "blessed." We are blessed with the right kind of home, with the right kind of job, with the right salary, and with other external things. We can wear our blessings on our sleeves as external badges we earn and wear. Maybe we look for these good things, these popular things to embrace. Deep down we know that this is not true or right, but the pull of the culture is pervasive. The lure of society is strong. Mark Twain once said about this journey towards external gains: "everybody's private motto: It's better to be popular than right."

Now you may object to this harsh, external critique of the idea of blessings. You may claim that there are deeper, and more real blessings. "My family is a blessing, my health is a blessing, and my blessings are intangible but real." This seems to be a good argument. This actually seems to be a great argument, and we could end right here. We could say that the world gets it wrong, but we in the church gets it right because we look at things like relationships, family, disposition, and the bright sunny day. We could take this positive, optimistic view and leave the worship feeling good about ourselves. It seems to make sense; it seems to be a good story for all of us to remember. But we have not yet turned to the scripture. We have not yet heard the Word of the Lord as it has been proclaimed to us in this time and space. Right now we have the teachings of Norman Vincent Peale or other positive thinkers backing up our ideas of blessings. But what if we hear from Jesus? For the world's values are complex and seductive, and even this positive thinking may not go far enough. The world has certain standards about worth, blessings and importance but Jesus suggests others. Before we decided what it means to be blessed, before we decide who is and who is not blessed, let's listen to Jesus.

Movement 3 - The Bizarre Answer of Christ

Christ turns the standards of the world on their head when he proclaims those who are blessed. We find Christ in the midst of a crowd, in the midst of those with diseases and those with unclean spirits. He is being watched by his disciples, by the crowd, by the sick, and, stopping for a moment, Christ looks at his disciples and speaks.

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who are hungry, for you will be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh."

This is not at all what the disciples were expecting. This is not at all what the crowd was expecting. This is not at all what the sick and the lame were expected. Christ took the standards of the world and turned them on their head. For it was expected that if someone was well off economically then that person was blessed by God. It was expected that if someone was healthy than that person was blessed by God. It was expected that if someone avoided tragedy than that person was blessed by God. Like today, the blessed (by society's standards) could wear their external badges for all to see.

Yet Christ turned everything over, reversed the ideas and the expectations when he claimed that those around him, the very ones who he was serving were the ones who were blessed by God. The sick and the lame and the poor are those who will receive the blessings of the Lord first. But he doesn't stop there. As soon as these works sink in, Christ goes another step as if to drive the point home.

"But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.
Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.
Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep."

Just in case you weren't sure about the point that Christ is trying to make, he draws out the implications. These aren't universal blessings. These aren't blessings for everyone, but only for the least. This is bizarre. This is different. This is unexpected. Maybe the disciples felt like they were sitting with Alice at the Mad Hatter's table for tea. Maybe you feel like you have gone through the looking glass into a different world where everything is different, a little warped and a little weird. Maybe you feel like at this moment you are hearing about a *Bizzaro* Christianity.

Do you know what that means, "bizzaro." It is a reference to a Superman comic and a Seinfeld episode. In the Superman comic, Bizzaro is the opposite of Superman. If he says, "I'm going to kill you," he means "I'm going to save you." Everything about Bizzaro leans towards a twisted version of the opposite. In the Seinfeld episode Elaine meets people who look like George and Kramer, but are responsible, respectful and kind. Everything is a kind of twisted opposite.

Maybe this is how you feel about this particular passage – it is a bizzaro Christianity that goes against everything that we may feel is important. The growing church isn't blessed. The church with resources isn't blessed. Even friends or family aren't signs of blessings. Instead, the ones that we try to serve because they seem down on their luck, the ones we look down on from the point up high with the disciples are the ones who are blessed. The ones who have no power, no external means are the ones that Christ claims to be preferred. Theologians like Roberto Goizueta claim that this shows God's preferential option for the poor. It shows that God prefers the poor, will go to the poor and blesses the poor first. Yet would you call those blessings? To be without security, to be yearning for sustenance, to be weeping and crying? These are backward, bizzaro blessings.

Maybe it is poor in spirit. Maybe it is a metaphor. Maybe if it was in a different gospel, but here the words of Jesus are pretty clear – blessed are the poor and the hungry and the weeping. Not in spirit, no in prayer, but in tangible, actual reality. The standards of the world are reversed, are turned on their head. This is where God's blessings fall.

Movement 4 – Can We be Blessed?

Maybe we wonder if we are left out. Maybe we hear the depth and the reality of this message and we get nervous. Where do we fit in with these blessings? Where can we find the hope that we too will be blessed by God? Do we need to give up all that we have and become one of the poor? Do we need to give up all that we have and become one of the hungry? Do we need to put ourselves through such a hell in life that our weeping will become real? Or are we to be left out of God's blessings. Are we destined to only watch those who are blessed from the outside, living our seemingly comfortable, our empty, life void of God's blessings?

Maybe you get angry at Christ for this message. Maybe you feel like saying, "fine, then I'm out and wash my hands of this movement." Maybe you think you will stay with the positive thinking because there is a broad universality that you can plug into.

Yet the nagging and the gnawing eat away at your soul. Your desire, your need for God's blessing, for being loved and lifted up by God continues to push you and grow within you. Maybe you feel like the other brother. You know, the other brother from the prodigal son. The brother who labors, who is devoted and who is always by his father's side. Yet you watch as your father gives a lavish feast to the one who squandered half of the family's wealth, who rejected his heritage, and who you left for dead. This is the one that your father blesses. Are you a little peeved? Yet you are drawn again and again to return to your father. You are drawn again and again to look for that blessing. It is something you desire, you yearn for and hope to achieve.

Are you a little angry that Luke does not make space for you or for me in these blessings? Now there may be some who can say that you are with the blessed. It is not my place to judge or decide. But it is my assumption (and we know what happens when someone makes an assumption) that the majority of us will not

find a place among these blessings. The majority of us will share that feeling that we are being cast out of the kingdom. We feel that we are left out.

Movement 5 – The Blessings of the Persecuted

But when we minister with Jesus, we are also blessed. We are not left out, because I have left out one blessing:

“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.”

This is not an easy blessing, but it is one with an opening. It is a blessing that maybe, just maybe we could consider latching onto, and growing into. Maybe we could imagine being blessed because we are persecuted? Let’s make sure we hear the depth of this blessing and hear the opposite of this:

“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”

This isn’t an easy blessing to hear, it isn’t a popular blessing to hear, but it is one that we can embrace. It still has its “bizzaro” ring to it, suggesting that the pastor and the church everyone speaks well of is not a blessed by God. It has a backwards look to it suggesting that the struggling church is the blessed church. The church that is scorned is the church that is embraced by God. Still we sit at the Mad Hatter’s table wondering about these backward blessings.

Yet hear this blessing in the context of the others. The poor, the hungry and the weeping are all at the margins of the world. They are all seen by the world as different, as odd, and uncomfortable. Add to that the ones who are persecuted and rejected by the world, and you will see the quartet of blessings.

Go against the world, walk against the tide and stream and the current of the world and you will be cast out of the world. And you will be blessed. I think of the later work of Martin Luther King Jr. He had made great strides with the Civil Rights movement. He had gained popularity and was spoken well of by many. But then King felt called to be an advocate for the poor. His leadership felt he was going the wrong way, those who held power felt he was going the wrong way, and King was mocked, persecuted and rejected by many of those who praised and supported his work with the Civil Rights movement. Then, at that moment, he was blessed. Some argue that his work with the poor led to his demise but it also led to his blessing by God, for he was in the midst of the Kingdom of God.

I don’t think this passage is calling us to give up all that we have. I don’t think this passage is calling us to live a life of poverty. I think this passage is calling us to get off the mountain, to go to the level place with Jesus and be with the poor, the hungry and the weeping. I think this passage is calling us not just to give to the poor but to be with the poor the weeping and the hungry. The theologian J. Rieger writes in his book *Remember the Poor* that we are called to look to the poor as an active person in relationships. We are not to refer to them as the other, but instead as one of us. We are to be with the poor to be in solidarity with them even if it leads to our rejection by the world. Remember the world judges success and worth by what you have. Yet if what you have are poor, hungry and weeping friends and companions, then you are worthless in the eyes of the world. If you speak the truth to the powers that be, just as Christ did, then you will be rejected by the world. If you go to the biggest churches, the most popular pastors, and tell them “woe to you when people speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets,” then you will be rejected.

This isn’t an easy road to walk. It is not an easy place to be, with Christ on the plain. Yet that is where you will receive the blessing from the Lord.

Movement 6 – The Kingdom of God

But here is the blessing. In that moment when you are with the least, in that moment when you are with those who have been rejected and denied then in that moment you will be in the Kingdom of God. In that

moment when you look to speak truth, when you look to be persecuted for the sake of the Lord, then you will be blessed. You will be showered with the presence of God. You will be walking in the way that God has called us all to walk. You will be living in the way that God has called us to live. It is the way of the cross, the grain of the cross that calls us to be the people that God wants us to be. That is the kingdom of God. Be with the blessed and you will be blessed. Be with the least and you will be lifted up. Be with those who are rejected and you will be accepted. You will receive the love and the blessings of the Lord.

AMEN