

A few weeks ago I was part of a fascinating Zoom meeting where the speaker offered insight into some of the bizarre behaviors that we've experienced during the pandemic. She explained that for most of history, before antibiotics, vaccines, or surgery, before pesticides and preservatives, most people didn't die from old age but from illness, injury—including, of course, war wounds, or famine. So our nervous systems developed defense mechanisms to help us survive, such as craving high calorie foods to outlast the lean months of a famine. These are instinctual, chemical responses that are totally beyond our control. So all that sourdough bread everyone was baking was a subconscious survival technique, because unfortunately our systems can't tell if we're being traumatized by a famine or a plague. Still, it was a great relief to everyone on the screen to realize that our extra pandemic padding wasn't the result of weakness or lack of willpower but was actually a sign of how highly evolved we are as a species. Yet, if you've heard me say it once, you've heard me say it dozens of times: scripture is the long story of God calling us beyond our human nature to a different, better way of living in the world.

If today's gospel reading sounded a little odd, it may be because Matthew's sermon on the mount is more popular than Luke's sermon on the plain. Matthew's list of who is blessed is a little longer and a little more palatable: blessed are the poor *in spirit*; blessed are those who hunger and thirst *for righteousness*. Matthew opens the interpretive door a little wider, which we like, right? I can count myself in with those who are blessed, because there are certainly days when my spirit seems impoverished, and when I witness injustice in the world I can rage in righteous indignation. But Luke's list is much less abstract: not blessed are the poor in spirit, but *blessed are you who are poor*. Not blessed are those who hunger for righteousness, but *blessed are you who are hungry now*. There is simply no way I can drive home to my warm house with all my nice stuff and claim to be poor; and although it may feel like I'm hungry all the time, my fridge and cupboards are far from empty. I can try to wedge myself into Matthew's more spiritualized list of blessings, but I'm definitely in the woe category for Luke.

We may have started out with the commendable goal of being more intentionally grateful, but our culture now overuses the word "blessed" to refer to basically any good thing that happens to us. Pleasant weather when we want to be outside: Blessed. No traffic when we're

driving somewhere: Blessed. Extra cheese sauce on our French fries at dinner: Blessed. Certainly poor, hungry, weeping, hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed people are not who we think of as blessed. We would try to avoid these conditions if we could. And to be rich, full, laughing, and well-spoken of seem like blessings to us. Yet Jesus flips those assumptions upside down.

We may think of being blessed as the opposite of being cursed, but that is not the dichotomy that Jesus illustrates here. Instead of thinking of being “blessed” as having some kind of benefit bestowed on us by God, think of it as a perspective: being satisfied, experiencing *shalom*—that is, the peace of God that passes understanding and surpasses circumstances, relying on God’s grace, provision, and mercy instead of relying on ourselves or trusting in the stuff that we collect to make us feel secure. Jesus doesn’t tell the rich and full and laughing that they are cursed; he merely says watch out that you don’t put too much faith in your bank accounts, in your full freezers, in your good times, or in your image. If we can only see God when things are going well for us, we’re in trouble—not because God is going to curse us, but because life is full of ups and downs; those good things are temporary, so what will happen if we’ve put all our trust in them? But in difficult circumstances, without obvious “proof” in the form of health, wealth, or status, we’re forced to trust in the God who is harder for us to see. When we can learn to live with confidence in God’s goodness, even when our circumstances aren’t so good, that’s when we recognize that we are truly blessed. If we depend not on the gifts but the Giver, our faith is no longer conditional.

If you have enough toilet paper in your closet to last until 2026, don’t feel too bad. That was just your survival instinct kicking into overdrive, trying to keep you alive. But we’ll always fear that we don’t have enough when we place our faith in the blessings we can count. Jesus calls us to freedom from that fear by counting on God instead. Jeremiah said it this way:

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, because they shall be like a tree planted by water, that doesn’t fear when the heat comes, that is not anxious in the year of drought, but that does not cease to bear fruit. May we, too, put our trust in the Lord, so that in all seasons we can not just trust that we are blessed but also live as a blessing to others.