

## **Woes in the Proclamation of Jesus: Implication and Relevance in a World of Injustice (Luke 6:24-26)**

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### **Introduction**

The short passage is part of the Sermon on the Plain, according to Luke's own description. In Matthew, it is called the Sermon on the Mount. In Luke it has three parts, beginning with the prophetic declaration of God's promise to those who unite themselves to him. In general, these are the downtrodden of life: the poor, the hungry, the weeping, and the persecuted. For them there is hope: the kingdom is theirs, they will be filled, they shall rejoice, and they shall be rewarded. But for those who ruthlessly oppose God, there is woe. Their riches are their fill, while weeping and suffering are in store for them. Our aim is to rediscover how these biblical woes can translate into concrete situations in a world where injustice seems to be on the increase.

Looking at the biblical woes and blessings in the Bible, an attentive and inquisitive reader will discover something peculiar. These woes and blessings are pronounced on the persons who either are in good terms with God or have done abominable and horrible things in the sight of God. The purpose of these pronouncements is to achieve a goal – to confirm the one who receives the blessings to continue to remain faithful and impeccable in the sight of God and the one who receives the woes to have a change of heart and turn to God, if not the woe will remain permanent in their lives.

### **The Four Woes (Luke 6:24-26)**

After the four blessings, the evangelist Luke reports the four *ouai*, which means "alas for". The concept here indicates an expression of pity for those who stand under divine judgment. The "woe" form is to be found in the OT (Isa 1:4-5; 5:8-23; Amos 5:18 and hosts of other passages). The woes are fairly common in the NT: Luke 10,13 par Matt 11:21 and

hosts of other passages.<sup>1</sup> The rich, full, laughing, and liked of 6:24-26 contrast with the poor, hungry, weeping, and persecuted of 6:20-23. The parallelism shows that those addressed in these verses are not seen as four separate groups but as one group with four characteristics.<sup>2</sup> The woes serve as a warning and a call of repentance to those who may be tempted to have much confidence in wealth, comfort, popularity, and possessions.

The audience of this sub-unit is complex. Luke 6:26 obviously includes a warning to disciples, since the phrase *hoi pateres autōn* (*their fathers*) looks to outsiders (as in 6:23). A point of the woes is “do not live as those on the outside live”. Your values are not to be their values, which bring woe. But it is an attitude and orientation that is challenged here, so as the disciples are warned, outsiders are also addressed with the same warning. An attitude of independence from God is the road to destruction. The reward of such life is fleeting, limited to the present. The OT provides numerous examples of the woe form. See for instance Deut 27:15-26; Isa 5:8-23; 30:1-2; 31:1; 33:1; 65:13-16 which many regard as parallel to this passage, since blessing and judgment are side by side.<sup>3</sup>

### **To the Rich: Consolation Now (Luke 6:24)**

Four woes appear to balance the four blessings. Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount does not contain the woes. There are, however, a number of connections between the woes and the Matthean Sermon which have indicated to learned biblical scholars either that Matthew knew the woes but decided not to employ them,<sup>4</sup> or that Luke is responsible for the woes but in producing them has been conditioned in part by other Sermon on the Mount materials employed by Matthew but not reproduced in Luke’s own Sermon.<sup>5</sup> Possible links include: (i) the emphatic “theirs”/“they” of Matthew’s beatitudes may echo the contrasting woes; (ii) his use of

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this see, I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1986), 255.

<sup>2</sup> H. Schürmann, *Das Lukasevangelium*, vol 1, HTKNT 3 (Freiburg: Herder, 1969), 337.

<sup>3</sup> For other OT passages see D. L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50* (ECNT; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999), 582-583.

<sup>4</sup> J. Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, WBC 34A (Dallas, Texas: Word, 1989), 286.

<sup>5</sup> J. Dupont, *Les Béatitudes*, vol 1 (Louvain: Nauwelaerts, 1958), 299-342.

“consolation” in Luke 6:24 may not be independent of the use of the cognate verb in Matt 5:4; (iii) *apechein*, “to have received payment”, is found in Luke 6:24 and Matt 6:2, 5, 16; (iv) *penthein*, “to mourn”, is found in Luke 6:25 and Matt 5:4; (v) the “rich”, “full”, and “laughing” of the woes could correspond to the almsgiving, fasting and prayer of Matt 6:2-18; (vi) Matthew has eight beatitudes while Luke has four beatitudes plus four woes. The case for linkage is suggestive but not overwhelming, and if there is dependence, the dependence could go either way. If one accepts that Luke 6:21b is more original than that of the Matthean counterpart, then it is more likely that the woes predate Luke and were present also in Matthew’s source.

In general, the woes closely follow the form of the corresponding beatitudes and provide an inverse formulation for the sentiments of the beatitudes. The second person indicator (“you”), the absence of which, in the opening clause of the first three beatitudes, made for awkwardness, is supplied for the first three woes. The explanation given for the first woe is unrelated to that for the opening beatitude. As with the fourth beatitude, the fourth woe has a distinctive form, but the woe lacks the elaboration provided for the beatitude by vv. 22b-23a.

*Ouai* (woe or alas) is an exclamation of pain and pity for the misfortune that awaits someone in a certain condition.<sup>6</sup> The contrast between woe and blessing is methodically marked out by *plēn* (but), a term that Luke employs often in his Gospel (fifteen times in Luke, thirty-one times in the NT).<sup>7</sup> Both *plēn* and *ouai*, appear in Matt 18:7, which indicates that the phrase can be of traditional origin. The woe or alas is conveyed to warn of danger and the nearness of judgment.<sup>8</sup>

The woe is employed in the LXX to render various Hebrew interjections, but is rare in secular Greek and may ultimately be a Latinism.<sup>9</sup> While

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<sup>6</sup> W. Bauer - W. F. Arndt F. W. Gingrich - F. W. Danker (eds), *A Greek - English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 591.

<sup>7</sup> Bauer et al, *A Greek - English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 669; similarly, A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke*, ICC (Edinburgh: Scribner, 1896), 182; likewise, Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 255.

<sup>8</sup> Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 142.

<sup>9</sup> Dupont, *Les Béatitudes*, vol 3, 28-29.

blessings are spoken over those who are in a particularly advantageous situation, woes are for those whose situation is a miserable one (though they may not realize it). The Gospel of Luke gives a rich supply of comparative materials for clarifying how it is that the rich are seen to be in such an unpleasant situation (cf. esp. Luke 11:41; 12:13-34; 16:1-13, 19-31; 18:18-30; 19:1-10). Wealth, almost inevitably (18:25), entraps those who possess them in a false set of values and loyalties which involve a foreshortened perspective in which love for the things of this world proves to be greater than desire for the kingdom of God (18:23).

The Lukan woe is addressed to the rich, a group that Luke often criticizes (1:53; 12:16; 14:12; 16:1, 21-22; 18:23, 25; 19:2; 21,1).<sup>10</sup> These are individuals whose loyalty is to their riches and who find contentment in the good life these material things are able to provide (12:15-21). Such folks have settled for the consolation that may be had from riches but will find that they have been short-changed by their unfortunate choice (cf. 16:25). Figures like Zacchaeus, Joseph of Arimathea, and Nicodemus portray that the rich are not excluded as a class or for merely belonging to a certain socioeconomic group, but for an attitude they often manifest. The rendition on these remarks is found in parabolic material in Luke's travel section (12:13-21; 16:19-31; see also 1:53).<sup>11</sup> James also makes equivalent comments (James 2:6-7; 5:1-6). The world's perspective and values are reversed here. What is condemned is an unwise focus that zeroes in on this life and its possessions without concern for God's desires or fellow humans. The danger of succumbing to things of only temporal value is all too real and deceptive.

The reason for the woe is affirmed incisively in the *hoti* (for) clause: the rich have already gotten their consolation here on earth. The possessions they accumulate are all they will have to portray for their efforts. *Apechete* (you have received) is a technical commercial term for signing

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<sup>10</sup> Hauck and Kasch, *TDNT* 6, 328. On this topic in the Synoptics, see T. Schmidt, *Hostility to Wealth in the Synoptic Gospels*, JSNTS 15 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987). In arguing against making too much of the criticism, Schmidt is correct, but his book perhaps overreacts in the other direction.

<sup>11</sup> For more see F. Godet, *A Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke*, vol 1, Tr E. W. Shalders – M. D. Cusin (Edinburgh: Clark, 1875), 317; similarly, N. Geldenhuys, *Gospel on the Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 210.

or accepting a receipt for payment given (Matt 6:2, 5, 16; Phil 4:18; Phlm 15).<sup>12</sup> They have in actual fact signed and received their payment while on earth, and hence they have no further claims on the debtor (cf. Matt 6:2, 5, 16). Indeed, the full payment is their wealth, but nothing will come to them from God in the life to come. The parables of the rich man who had no good sentiment for Lazarus both portray that Jesus views this “riches now” focus as terribly, even destructively, short-sighted.<sup>13</sup> Again, the Epistle of James has a conceptual parallel (1:9-11). The consolation the rich have is more like a loser’s trophy in the eternal perspective. Whereas in the future the poor will reap much benefit from their commitment and faithfulness to God and participate in the eternal kingdom, spiritually insensitive and heartless rich people hold only an empty bag. The term *paraklēsin* (consolation) is evidently negative here, although it is often positive in Lukan usage (Luke 2:25; Acts 4:36; 9:31; 13:15; 15:31).

### To the Full: Hunger Then (6:25a)

The **second** woe gives the condition of the rich. The warning of reversal goes to those who are full. *Empeplesmēnoi* (those who are filled) illustrates the states in which the rich live. They are “sated with the good things of this life”.<sup>14</sup> Luke 16:19 makes the point clear. They are not in need of anything now. The aim for the future woe is that they shall be hungry (observe the use of *hoti* again, as in 6:24). In the future, these insensitive rich people shall lack the things they now have in abundance. What they have now, they will utterly lack in the eternal future. The warning reflects OT woes as well (cf. Isa 5:22; 65:13; Amos 8:11).<sup>15</sup> Of course, those who are filled in the future will be the righteous, who may

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. H. K. Luce, *The Gospel according to St. Luke*, CGTSC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), 146; Bauer et al., *A Greek – English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 84-85; Hanse, *TDNT* 2, 828.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. J. Ernst, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas* RNT 3 (Regensburg: Pustet, 1977) 221; J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke* (i-ix) (AB 28; Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1981) 636.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke*, 182; Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 636.

<sup>15</sup> Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Luke*, 182; E. Klostermann, *Das Lukasevangelium*, HNT 5 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1929), 80.

be suffering now (Jer 31:10-14).<sup>16</sup> God will reverse the situation and vindicate the righteous.

### To the Laughing: Weeping Then (6:25b)

The **third** woe gives the attitude of the rich, derisive laughter now. Again, *nyn* shows the contrast – with weeping in 6:21. *Gelōntes* (those who laugh) is key here. It is very clear that levity or harmless humour is not in view here. In the LXX, the verb *gelaō* is often tied to laughter that is boastful, self-satisfied, condescending, or rejoicing in the harm that others experience.<sup>17</sup> For instance, Lam 1:7 employs the term of how the enemies laughed or gloated at Jerusalem's destruction. Jewish Wisdom Literature often employs the term to portray foolish people and their harmful humour (cf. Eccl 7:6; Sir 21:20; 27:13). Only in Gen 21:6 is *gelaō* used in a positive sense in the LXX. Therefore, the image is of a person of worldly proficiency, who is indifferent and insensitive because of self-satisfaction.<sup>18</sup> The epistle of James (5:5) also illustrates in harsh terms the insensitive and cruel attitude of such a person. But the Lukan Jesus issues a woe for such people, because (*hoti*) this laughter shall also be reversed. The situation will become so chaotic that only mourning and weeping will be the only experience of such people. The language is reminiscent of Isa 65:14 and has conceptual parallels in Rev 18:15, 19. The double description of the reversal in terms of both mourning and weeping intensifies the picture of pain by employing two terms to allude to a single idea. The allusion to mourning may recall the beatitude of Matt 5:4 in a reversed direction. The lack of blessing on the insensitive and wicked rich in the eternal future contrasts with what those who weep now will have then. The joy of possession now will become the pain and anguish of what is lost in perpetuity.

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<sup>16</sup> A. R. C. Leaney, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke*, HBNTC (New York: Black, 1958), 136.

<sup>17</sup> Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary*, 256; Rengstorff, *TDNT* 1, 659-60; likewise, H. Schürmann, *Das Lukasevangelium* vol 1, HTCNT 3 (Freiburg: Herder, 1969), 338 n.91.

<sup>18</sup> N. Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 216 n.10; F. Godet, *A Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke*, vol 1 (Edinburgh: Clark, 1875), 317; W. Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas*, THKNT 3 (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1963), 145; Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 637.

## To the Well-Spoken-Of Who Are Like the False Prophets: Woe (6:26)

The **fourth** woe contrasts with the fourth beatitude of 6:23. The woe includes a warning to the disciples, as the reference to “their fathers” makes clear. If only the excluded rich were in view, then the verse would read “your fathers”. The woe serves as a warning to the disciples, as well as to outsiders, not to fall into the trap of courting acceptance for one’s message at the expense of truthfulness, an approach that will make them function more like false prophets. Popularity at the expense of being God’s faithful representative is disastrous.<sup>19</sup> The concept of Jesus’s message being unpopular is frequent in the NT (John 15:19; James 4:4; Luke 2:34; 12:51-53; 1 Cor 1:18-25; 1 Pet 3:13-17).<sup>20</sup>

The reason (*gar*, for) for the woe is that the popularity seeker is in the company of those who set a bad precedent in Israel’s history. Israel frequently sought prophets who gave the message she wanted to hear, rather than giving God’s message (Jer 5:31; 14:13-16; 23:9-15, 27-28; Ezek 22:23-31; Isa 30:10; Mic 2:11).<sup>21</sup> Seeking such popularity at the expense of God’s message is like commending a false prophet. The separation of disciples from their unbelieving ancestry is indicated by the phrase their fathers. It portrays Jesus’ disapproval of those who reject him now, a disapproval that is also indicated in the emphatic concluding section position the phrase has in the verse, just as in 6:23.

Although Schürmann<sup>22</sup> applies 6:26 to the current false teachers in the early church, citing 6:39-40, Ernst<sup>23</sup> prefers a reference to the Pharisees by appealing to Matt 6:1-5; 23:5. Nevertheless, the warning seems to be broad. Anyone reflecting these values or drawn to them is rebuked. The saying warns of courting the approval of the insensitive, yet popular,

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<sup>19</sup> F. W. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age: A Commentary on St Luke’s Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 143.

<sup>20</sup> Ernst, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas*, 222.

<sup>21</sup> Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary*, 256-57; Leaney, *A Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Luke*, 137; Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 637; Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Luke*, 183.

<sup>22</sup> *Das Lukasevangelium voll*, 338-39.

<sup>23</sup> Ernst, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas*, 221.

rich.<sup>24</sup> Whether Jesus' opponents were guilty of this so that he alludes directly to them is less clear. Courting such popularity was the very problem of messengers of old, who departed from God and whom the people wrongly embraced.

The woes portray that the world's values and God's values are very different indeed. In addition, whatever treasure one briefly has now may not equate with whatever loss one has forever later. Where is the best place to rest one's wellbeing: in the short-term present or in the eternal future? That is the question Jesus raises here. He says that the disciple/follower is to be dependent on God and stand up for him. It may mean poverty, rejection, persecution, and pain now. But one may be assured that God will bless abundantly. Do not be deceived by the self-sufficient and indifferent way of the rich. They have much now, but they will have nothing later. One can have consolation now and lose, or one may lack now, only to receive abundant blessing later. Rest assured that God's way is just. Here is the keynote of the Beatitudes and woes: God's blessing is on those who come to him to receive what he generously offers, and that blessing knows no socio-economic limitation. In fact, one's position may be an obstacle to blessing.

### **Implication and Relevance of the Woes**

The Sermon on the Plain is Luke's equivalent to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. Luke presents the Sermon without the legal elements that Matthew treated, probably because of his Gentile audience.<sup>25</sup> The fact that Luke can summarize for Gentiles what Jesus originally delivered to a Jewish audience shows how timeless and fundamental the Evangelist saw this ethic as being for the Christian community. This view holds true whether the sermon is an anthology of Jesus' remark or reflects a single occasion. The fact of conceptual parallels to Matthew shows that what Jesus taught must still be taken seriously by Jesus' disciples today, even

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<sup>24</sup> Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, 288.

<sup>25</sup> The question of the relationship between this Sermon and the Sermon on the Mount is complex. This sermon could be regarded as Luke's summary of the sermon Matthew records. For details, comparisons, and a discussion of the ethical-theological role of the Sermon on the Mount and Plain, see Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, excursus 7: "The Sermon on the Plain in Luke". Also covered in detail there is whether the sermon represents a single occasion or an anthology of Jesus' ethical teaching. Either option is possible.



if some of the particular legal examples recorded in Matthew are omitted because of their lack of direct relevance.

The Sermon in Lukan account begins with a prophetic blessings and woes (20-26). It is an invitation and warning to those listening to him. The first part of this prophetic pronouncement declares God's grace of blessing to those who identify with him. On the other hand, the woes, unique to this gospel, portrays God's displeasure on those who oppose the blessing Jesus gives and who persecute his disciples as a result.

The four woes match and contrast the four blessings, revealing Jesus' displeasure with people, who are uncaring about those around them and who refuse to be sensitive to God. As with the blessings, the four descriptions are not four distinct groups but four related descriptions of one kind of person. The prophetic woes are utterances of pity and pain for those who will face misfortune or judgment.

The "rich" are singled out because they often take advantage of the poor (Jas 2:1-7; 5:1-6). The remark is, of course, a generalization, since some rich do respond to the Gospel. But the warning is serious, for wealth can create a sense of independence that results in distance from God and callousness toward others (1 Tim 6:6-18).<sup>26</sup> The comfort is their wealth, which they cannot take with them.

The next woe is against those "who are well fed now". In a classic case of reversal, they will be hungry on the Judgment Day – a warning that recalls the OT (Isa 5:22; 6:13; Amos 8:11).<sup>27</sup> Those who abandon God and place their hopes solely on the good life here have little comfort for the future. Those who "laugh now" will someday mourn and weep (cf. Isa 65:14); they are too enthralled with the pursuit of life to care about anything else.

The final woe reveals the spiritual depravity of these people. They are spoken well by others, just like the false prophets of old. They have

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<sup>26</sup> W. E. Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981) is a wonderful book on this topic.

<sup>27</sup> Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Luke*, 182.

settled for an approach to life that does not challenge them to live any differently. They wrongly see themselves as unaccountable to God. The series of four woes portrays the serious spiritual condition of these folks, who see themselves as being on top of the world. As the sequence of blessings and woes reveal, appearances can be deceptive. This passage warns the insensitive rich that God notes their lack of attention to him through their lack of attention to others.

The blessings and woes possess two central points. The first is the awareness of what we are going through, and he promises to vindicate the faithful. It should be noted that the ethics of Jesus call for sacrifice and patience. To love in a way that is unlike the world risks being misunderstood. Only those who rest in God's care and have assurance of his blessing can endure the hard path. The Sermon itself encourages us to remain strong before the world in the midst of weakness. We do not need to seek vindication for ourselves, we can turn the cheek, and we can be generous to those who will not be generous in return.

The blessings and woes also reflect God's values. We continue to ponder why God singles out the poor and suffering and issue such stark warnings to the wealthy? Surely God is affirming the dignity of people whom the world treats as trash.

## **Conclusion**

Each of the judgments is at once established by revealing in what the blessedness consists; and the last is substantiated at the greatest length for the clear reason that the disciples would undergo much persecution. In a world full of injustice, Jesus in the Sermon indicates in a clear way how his followers can change the status quo and point out the new way to the fallen human race.