

# Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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## Luke's Gospel: The twelve and the blessings and the Woes (Luke 6:12-26)

Today, we recommence our systematic study of Luke's Gospel with the first of six talks in this our third series. In our previous series, we began to study the public ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. In Luke 5 and Luke 6, incidents and issues regarding His disciples were noted by Luke,<sup>1</sup> but the main point for us to start with today, is that a disciple is a person who's decided to follow Jesus and to obey His teachings. By definition a disciple is a learner from, or a pupil of, a teacher. That's different from being a believer in Him - although I hasten to add that you can't follow Christ unless you've accepted Him as your Saviour and Lord! I used to preach in a public place in Newcastle upon Tyne with a fiery preacher who often said to his audiences, "To believe in the Lord Jesus costs you nothing because it cost Him everything in His death on the Cross. But to become a disciple of Christ will cost you everything!" That's a simplification of the truth, but it's a good way of remembering the important difference between the two concepts.

From this point onwards and throughout Luke's Gospel, we shall see that Luke includes much of the Lord's teaching about discipleship. But what has Luke already written about the disciples of Jesus?

1. The profound impact that Christ had on Simon Peter and his fishing partners, James and John, when He demonstrated His power over nature with the great haul of fish (Luke 5:1-10a, New King James Version). After that incident, He called them to follow Him. *"And Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men.' So when they had brought their boats to land, they forsook all and followed Him"* (Luke 5:10b-11);
2. The attractive power of His Person, and in His word, which caused Matthew to follow Him (Luke 5:27-32); and
3. In answer to the Pharisees' criticism that His disciples plucked and ate grain on the Sabbath, the altogether different lifestyle of Christian disciples when compared with the way of living of other people who follow other religious teachers.

So let me ask you three personal questions regarding Christian discipleship:

1. Have you truly repented and put your faith in the Saviour to become a believer in Him? (This is the first step towards Christian discipleship.)
2. Have you responded to His call to follow Him throughout your life upon earth?
3. Do you have the on-going experience of Christ-given liberty in your Christian discipleship?

Our study of Luke 6:12-26 divides into three parts:

1. The Twelve disciples (Luke 6:12-16);
2. The Blessings of true discipleship (Luke 6:17-23); and
3. The Woes of worldliness (Luke 6:24-26).

### 1. The Twelve disciples (Luke 6:12-16)

Christ's selection of the Twelve disciples was preceded by His whole night in prayer to God over this important matter. He went out of town and up into the mountain to pray alone. Luke is the only one of the three synoptic Gospel writers who mentions this night of prayer. Luke saw Jesus as the perfect, dependent Man.<sup>2</sup> It's a reminder for us to be people of prayer.

Luke 6:12 states that Jesus continued all night in prayer. He felt the need of God's guidance for the task ahead of Him. He therefore denied Himself of sleep for Luke 6:13 opens with the words, *"And when it was day, He called His disciples to Himself."* The majority of these disciples were Galileans, who had seen His miracles and heard His teaching and had committed themselves to follow Him. From this wider group of followers, He chose the Twelve, whom He named apostles. He chose them to assist Him in His ministry; and so that He could send them out on missions of their own. *"Then He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach"* (Mark 3:14). They were sent out following a period of learning from Him of how, and what, to preach. *"Then He called His twelve disciples together and gave them power and authority over all demons, and to cure diseases. He*

sent them to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick" (Luke 9:1-2). But the spiritual need in Israel at that time was so great that the Lord Jesus involved others soon afterwards. "After these things the Lord appointed seventy others also, and sent them two by two before His face into every city and place where He Himself was about to go. Then He said to them, 'The harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few; therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into His harvest'" (Luke 10:1-2). These, too, were apostles for the word 'apostle' simply means 'a messenger, one sent on a mission'.

However, we must consider "the Twelve" as a special group of disciples for they continued with the Lord throughout the remainder of His life on earth. Their experiences qualified them to be the foundational leaders of the Church in the establishment of Christianity throughout the world. Later Luke wrote about this position in Acts 1:13-26, when Matthias was chosen to replace Judas Iscariot. Here in Luke 6:14-16, Luke identified each of the Twelve by name in six groups of two. Let's now look at these individuals in turn:

- a. **Simon** whom Jesus also named Peter. He was a son of Jonah, and on several occasions he had significant encounters with the Lord. He also made that important confession in Matthew 16:16, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*" and, as a result, the Lord Jesus gave him "*the keys of the kingdom of heaven*" (Matthew 16:19). He used these keys on the Day of Pentecost, when he brought the Gospel message to the Jews and again in Cornelius' house, when he took the Gospel to the Gentiles (see Acts 2 and 10). Moreover, he became the leader of the Twelve and he was regarded as the Apostle to the circumcision (Galatians 2:8).
- b. **Andrew**, Peter's brother. It was Andrew who introduced Peter to the Lord. He had been a disciple of John the Baptist until the latter sent him to follow Jesus with the words, "*Behold the Lamb of God*" (John 1:36). Andrew is mentioned twice more in John's Gospel and on each occasion he brought people to Jesus (see John 6:8-9 and John 12:21-22).
- c. **James** the son of Zebedee. He was one of the three privileged disciples whom the Lord took apart to witness special events. For example, he went with Peter and John up the mountain to see the Lord's Transfiguration (Luke 9:27-36). In the persecution of the early church, he was killed by Herod Agrippa I (see Acts 12:1-2).
- d. James' brother, **John**, who many think to be the other disciple of John the Baptist who went with Andrew to follow Jesus (John 1:35-39). Jesus nicknamed James and John "*Sons of Thunder*" (Mark 3:17) because of their fiery attitude to others who did not respond to Christ. John is best known for his Gospel and the letters which bear his name; and as the writer of the Book of Revelation.
- e. **Philip**, a native of Bethsaida, who introduced Nathanael to Jesus (John 1:43-48). Jesus questioned Philip about resourcing provisions for feeding the five thousand (John 6:5-7, 10). It was Philip who brought the Greeks to Andrew (John 12:20-22). It was Philip who asked the Lord in the Upper Room to reveal the Father to the disciples, which prompted the declaration, "*He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?*" (John 14:9)
- f. **Bartholomew**, which is generally understood to be another name for Nathanael, probably the same Nathanael of John 1:43-48. He was sceptical when Philip first told him that he had discovered the Messiah. However, he went along with Philip to meet Jesus. Jesus greeted him, "*Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile*" (John 1:47). When the Lord told Nathanael He had previously seen him under the fig tree just before Philip had met him, he immediately confessed, "*Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!*" (John 1:49)
- g. **Matthew**, the tax collector, also named Levi. Immediately, when he was called to follow Christ, he left his lucrative job behind. He made a great feast in his house, which caused the Pharisees to complain in Luke 5:30, "*Why do You eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?*" This brought the wonderful answer from Jesus, "*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance*" (Luke 5:31-32). Matthew wrote the first Gospel.
- h. **Thomas**, also called "*Twin*" (John 20:24). Thomas' ignorance about the way and the place, to which the Lord was going, enabled Jesus to announce that He Himself was the way and the truth and the life (John 14:5-6). It was also Thomas who said he wouldn't believe that the Lord had risen from the dead until he saw the conclusive evidence. But when he did see the Lord, he at once confessed, "*My Lord and my God*" (John 20:19-29).
- i. **James** the son of Alphaeus. He most probably was the James who held a place of responsibility in the church at Jerusalem after the other James had been killed by Herod (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18 and Galatians 2:9, 12).
- j. **Simon** called the Zealot, of whom nothing else is specifically recorded in Scripture. A zealot was a Jewish nationalist.

- k. **Judas** the son of James. This Judas is thought to be Lebbaeus, whose surname was Thaddeus in the other lists of the Twelve (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18 and Acts 1:13).
- l. **Judas Iscariot**, of whom Luke wrote in Luke 6:16, *"Who also became a traitor."* He had responsibility for the group's money. But he betrayed the Lord for thirty pieces of silver. The Lord knew all along that he was a false disciple. *"[Jesus said] 'But there are some of you who do not believe.' Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who would betray Him. ... Jesus answered them, 'Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?' He spoke of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, for it was he who would betray Him, being one of the twelve"* (John 6:64, 70-71). Therefore, the Lord called him, *"the son of perdition"* (John 17:12).

## 2. The Blessings of true discipleship (Luke 6:17-23)

After choosing the Twelve, the Lord Jesus came down from the mountain with them and all of the other disciples who had accompanied Him. He came down to a "level place", where He was accessible to everyone. The crowds of disciples were joined by a great multitude of people. They came from afar, *"from all Judea and Jerusalem, and from the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon"* (Luke 6:17a). Their sense of their great need caused them to travel large distances to meet this Teacher, whose fame had spread from throughout Galilee to distant parts of their country. They *"came to hear Him and be healed of their diseases"* (Luke 6:17b).

The events of Luke 4:40-41, when the Lord healed the sick and exorcised demons, were now repeated (Luke 6:18a). They also were healed (Luke 6:18b). But these events showed up the nation's spiritual depravity. It was so different from what God had promised them when they entered the land of Canaan. He had said to them then that they would be free from the illnesses and afflictions meted upon the Egyptians (see Deuteronomy 7:15). In Luke 6:18, the dire condition of the nation is captured with the words, *"as well as those who were tormented with unclean spirits."* In Luke 6:19, the desperation of the Jews is almost tangible. *"And the whole multitude sought to touch Him, for power went out from Him and healed them all."* However, the multitude was totally under His control and there was no crowd-surge. Neither was there any who tried to prevent them or protect Him. He had no need of a bodyguard! They didn't need to get near Him *"for power went out from Him"* (Luke 6:19b). No one missed out on the blessings available that day. He *"healed them all"* (Luke 6:19c).

That day, the Lord Jesus did more than just restore the people to normal physical health and spiritual soundness. He spoke to their hearts and consciences about a new way of living before their God. He spoke words of life. He spoke words which, if they grasped and followed, would give them the blessings of the kingdom of God. Many Christians equate these words to the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5-7. No doubt Luke 6:20-37 is a condensed version of that teaching. But we should recognise their own value; and understand that the Lord repeated the principles of the kingdom of God, whenever it was appropriate - such as on this occasion. Perhaps it's correct to say that, in these principles given by Luke, the Lord was instructing His disciples about the character of the grace of God that would be produced within them when the Gospel had its full effect upon them.

Let's now read the blessings He pronounced that day on the plains. *"He lifted up His eyes toward His disciples, and said: 'Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of Man's sake. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven, for in like manner their fathers did to the prophets'"* (Luke 6:20-23).

Notice that He addressed His disciples directly and said, *"Blessed are **you** poor"* and not, *"blessed are **the** poor"*! His teaching was contrary to the traditional teachings of the Jews, who regarded riches as an indication of God's blessings. Here the Lord Jesus was referring to the way that His disciples would purposely choose to live in order to fulfil His command to spread the Gospel. He was speaking about their self-imposed poverty they took for His name's sake. They would **not** be wealthy people. Therefore others wouldn't be attracted to the message of the Gospel as a means of becoming rich. Also riches could have become a snare to Gospel ministry. As it was, none of the disciples had material resources. Rather, theirs was the blessings of constant dependence on the Lord, and of proving His faithfulness.

In Luke 6:21 the Lord Jesus added two more blessings - the blessings of hunger and sorrow. Once again, these blessings refer to the rewards which His disciples would receive for faithfulness to Him. William MacDonald's *Believer's Bible Commentary* states that these blessings of hunger and sorrow come to, "disciples of Jesus Christ who deliberately adopt a life of self-denial in order to help alleviate human need, both spiritual and physical. It is people who are willing to get along on a plain, inexpensive diet rather than deprive others of the Gospel by their indulgence. All such self-denial will be rewarded in a future day. "Blessed are you who weep now." Not that sorrow is in itself a blessing; the weeping of unsaved people has no lasting benefit connected with it. Here Jesus is speaking about tears that are shed for His sake. Tears for the lost, perishing mankind. Tears over the divided, impotent state of the church. All sorrow endured in serving the Lord Jesus Christ. Those who sow in tears will reap in joy."<sup>3</sup>

The final beatitude of Luke 6:23 concerned His disciples: of when they were to be hated, despised and reviled by the world; the fact that they were to be excommunicated from their previous religious affiliations; and that they were to be reproached and slandered because of their association with the Lord Jesus Christ, the rejected Messiah. He regarded them as following in the line of faithful saints from Israel's past for they were to receive the same treatment as the Old Testament prophets.

### 3. The Woes of worldliness (Luke 6:24-26)

Let's now read Luke 6:24-26. *"But **woe** to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. **Woe** to you who are full, for you shall hunger. **Woe** to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. **Woe** to you when all men speak well of you, for so did their fathers to the false prophets."*

These four "woes" were addressed to those who heard the Lord Jesus that day and whose attitudes were not totally towards the Lord, whom they had come to regard as a source of temporal help. They included some who regarded themselves as His disciples, but who were mere professors of Christ. They would twist and change Gospel truths as they sought the world's applause rather than the reproach of Christ. Their deserved reward awaits them in a future time, when they'll experience everlasting hunger, pain and sorrow.

#### Finally, what about us today?

For you and me, these four blessings and four woes the Lord pronounced that day provide necessary reality checks. It's so easy in a materialistic world to avoid the many practical challenges of discipleship. Just as there were two kinds of people who called themselves "disciples" that day, so today:

1. In the fourth beatitude, the phrase *"for the Son of Man's sake"* (Luke 6:22), really shows that the Lord had His **true** disciples in mind. He spoke of issues they would have to face whilst they lived in a hostile world. Disciples must remain faithful to their calling. Things that would naturally be regarded as obstacles become blessings when willingly endured for Him. But the disciple's motivation must always be one of love for Christ. Also, the idea of being blessed is different from man's definition of 'being happy by having a good life'. In Luke 6:20-23, the Lord Jesus is essentially presenting the privileges and compensations which are guaranteed only to those who truly accept the responsibilities of bearing His Name during the period of His rejection. To such He said, and says again today, *"Yours is the kingdom"*!
2. Upon the second group of people, the Lord Jesus called down woes, not blessings. Such profess some kind of belief in Him, but in reality they follow false teachers (that is, those who misrepresent the truth of God's word). This group lives for present rewards. They get satisfaction from their material possessions and from satisfied appetites - both features of modern secular life in the western world. Their happiness also derives from their 'good' reputation in the world, which applauds their adaptations of Christian truths to fit in with its culture. Such are their temporal pleasures. But their judgment is made clear in the Lord's words, *"shall hunger"* (Luke 6:25) and, *"shall mourn and weep"* (Luke 6:25).

#### Footnotes

1. Luke 5:1-11, 5:27-35, 6:1-5.
2. In Luke's Gospel, there are seven occasions when it is recorded that Jesus prayed:
  - At His baptism and the start of His public ministry, Luke 3:21;
  - In Luke 5:16, His habit of praying is stated;
  - Here, in Luke 6:12, before He chose the Twelve;
  - In Luke 9:18, before He asked His disciples the searching question about who He really is;
  - At His Transfiguration, Luke 9:28-29;
  - In Luke 11:1, when His disciples then asked Him to teach them to pray; and
  - In Gethsemane as He faced the ordeal of the Cross, Luke 22:40-46.
3. *Believer's Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments*, 1997. Thomas Nelson, Nashville, USA.

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