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Bible Study—Leader's Guide

Based on Blessing

by Curtis Gast

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These sessions are designed for four 90-minute discussion periods but could be abbreviated to four 60-minute sessions by limiting each section of the study to 20 minutes instead of 30 minutes. Each session is divided into three learning categories:

1. Case History--getting a sense of the theme for the session from a here-and-now perspective.
2. Scripture Study--consulting the source for discussion and action.
3. Bridging--bringing an ancient story into a contemporary life situation so that the story has meaning today.

Case History

1. Permit the group ample time to read the case silently.
2. Pose the learning questions:
 - a. What is happening in this case?
 - b. Who are the people involved?
 - c. What are the issues?
3. Address as many of the case questions as possible in a 30-minute (or 20-minute) time period. Answers are not expected to be exhaustive. Select two or three key questions prior to the start of the class, and tackle those questions first.

Scripture Study

1. Read assigned biblical verses aloud. Shared reading by members of the study group is preferred.
2. Pose the study questions.
3. Fill in the gaps from notes included in this guide and from other resources (Galilea, Segundo, *The Beatitudes*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY; Crosby, Michael, *Spirituality of the Beatitudes*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY).

Bridging

1. Ask the group to take a moment to reread the case history.
2. Allow a few moments for individual reflection on the questions.
3. Address as many of the bridging questions as time permits giving priority to those questions you feel best reflect the direction of class discussion to this point.

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Each section will take approximately 30 minutes. Keep the study moving. It is necessary to deal with all three sections in order to give the study continuity. It is likely not all the questions can be addressed.

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Session 1: *Blessing in Poverty*

Luke 6:20-21

1. Of all the Gospel writers, Luke is considered to be the champion of the underdog. He shows a marked sympathy for the underprivileged. While not disdain-ing wealth, he does outline a stewardship of wealth; i.e., the rich should graciously and willingly share their resources with the needy.
2. Beatitude means blessing--the pronouncement of a "good thing."
3. The Hebrew word for poor means "saintly" or "pious." This would then put the poor more in Matthew's category of defining poor as "poor in spirit." However, given the context of Luke's inclu-sion, there can be no doubt that Luke has in mind those who are poor in material resources.
4. Likewise in verse 21. Luke is certainly referring to those who have little or no food, while Matthew "spir-itualizes" this to mean something other than physical hunger.
5. A recent conference of Catholic bishops meeting in Puebla, Mexico, identified the poor of Latin Amer-ica in the tradition of Luke--the needy, the socially marginalized and the oppressed.

Session 2: *Blessing in Persecution*

Luke 6:22-23

1. This blessing is not a pronouncement upon any particular category of people, i.e., the poor, hungry, etc. It is directed at all who would attempt to live out the mission of Christ.
2. "Cast out your name as evil" is the Semitism that means "spread nasty rumors about you" or "give a bad report". Likely it refers to an early form of excom-munication from synagogue or temple in Judaism and the church in the early Christian community. The point: Bold witness for Christ may cause trouble within the community of belief. Roman Catholic priests who have worked with the Sandinista govern-ment in Nicaragua by engaging in social active ministry and revolution have been chastised and even excommunicated by the Roman Catholic hei-rarchy. A possible topic to explore, if you feel capable, is: What is the primary purpose of the Church--to care for people or to save souls? Or is it both?
3. The beatitude of persecution is not a habit to be acquired or sought. Rather it is something that will come, perhaps unexpectedly, when people are really faithful.
4. The promise Jesus gives is a special one. It points beyond a cross of suffering to hope of resurrection.

Session 3: *Pain in Plenty*

Luke 6:24-25

1. Note that Jesus does not "curse" or "condemn" the rich in these verses. He simply states the obvious: Being wealthy just for the sake of being wealthy and the Kingdom of God are not compatible states.
2. "Woe" is the antithesis of "happy" and implies dis-tress, pain and sadness. It also carries with it a sense of warning.
3. Being rich in the sense of having necessities and pleasures of this life is not condemned by Jesus. Indeed, these are the very things to which the poor aspire. Basically, Jesus is saying the rich need to be converted or liberated from their pursuit of wealth so they can be free to embrace authentic Christian values.
4. Too often we emphasize the mission of the rich to reach out to the poor. Jesus seems to suggest that the poor, also, have a mission to evangelize the rich, i.e., to help the rich see their wealth, power and pres-tige can be dehumanizing and spirit stealing.
5. The eye of the needle in Matthew 19 refers to a small entrance in the wall of the city for a night entrance. It is large enough only for a man without his baggage to enter. It would be impossible for the man's camel to go through the entrance.

Session 4: *Pain in Popularity*

Luke 6:26

1. This "woe" seems to be of little importance when related to the first three beatitudes. However, Luke sees this as the very core of the human problem--the quest for status can rob us of real values and cause us to measure out importance by externals such as appearance, honors, and flattery.
2. The false prophets referred to by Luke are those who promised what the people wanted to hear, instead of the honest prophets who spoke God's word.
3. The prophets have always been unpopular be-cause they spoke against the very things by which some people would exploit others to gain riches or prestige.
4. The prophets always called for justice and servan-thood.
5. Luke does not condemn popularity as such. Doing God's will and work will make a person popular with some and unpopular with others (Note Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; Ghandi; Mother Teresa). It is a matter of discernment.