

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

The Sermon on the Plain Part 1

Sermon Reflection Notes

Luke's account of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain has been so overshadowed by Matthew's Sermon on the Mount that it is difficult to read the Luke text without comparing it to Matthew and noting what is missing or different in Luke. While the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew) extends over three chapters (109 verses), the Sermon on the Plain is packed into part of one chapter (30 verses). Despite the disparity in content, the sequence of the sermon in Luke agrees with that of Matthew, giving rise to the assumption that there must have been a recorded version of the sermon that influenced the writings of both Matthew and Luke.

The Sermon on the Plain gets its name from how it begins: "He came down with them and stood on a level place...." When we think about it, this makes perfect sense for Jesus; God sent him to be with us, here, among the mortals, so of course he chose to stand eye to eye with the people. Additionally, Jesus doesn't say "Blessed are *the*..." (fill in the blank here—the meek, the humble, the peacemakers) like he does in Matthew's gospel. In Luke, he looks at his followers right in the eye and says "Blessed are *you* who are poor.... Blessed are *you* who are hungry..."

Jesus' blessing isn't the one we may be used to hearing or even seeing on social media. *#Blessed--Thank you, we are so blessed—We are blessed to be able to help in this way---* We've all seen, heard, or even used these phrases before. Professor Kate Bowler once said that "blessed is a loaded term because it implies that God is somehow rewarding you for being good. It's a way of saying, thank you God, and I kind of deserve this." We use it as a humble brag sometimes, but the Sermon on the Plain has a radically different way of talking about being blessed. Jesus was saying, though you may be poor, or crying, or hungry, to me you are beautiful. You have worth. You are loved and part of the family, no matter what the world may say. It's a countercultural and subversive message instead of conventional wisdom.

Pastor Ron pointed out that we never hear of anyone arguing to put the beatitudes on the walls of courthouses or schoolrooms the way we sometimes hear about the ten commandments. It would be so radical and countercultural to suggest mercy in a courthouse or peace at the Pentagon. He also pointed out he's not a fan of posting any scripture on any state buildings, not because he's worried about the church influencing the state, but because he doesn't want judges and school boards interpreting scripture. That job belongs to the church.

Pastor Ron also pointed out that the "woe" section at the conclusion of the beatitudes is more challenging to us. Jesus takes the antithesis of each blessing and 'woes' them: "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation..." Matthew's version of the beatitudes does not include these, but Luke, more than any of the four gospels, has stern things to say to those who have money. It's important to remember that a woe is not necessarily a condemnation of someone. It's more a sorrow. When Jesus says: "woe to you who are rich now," it seems he is saying 'you've put your trust in this money, your faith in your

wealth. You've got what you were after.' Woe—sorrow—to those who find their identity in these fleeting things.

The beatitudes (and the woes) tell us about the heart of God; that God sees value in those whom others reject. It may be easier to trust in God when there is less in life that is competing for that trust. But the crowd, like us, followed Jesus on the plain to be healed. To be touched. To find hope and meaning. And they found it in a grace-filled and merciful God who offers love without price. They found the blessing only God can give. And in that blessing, they, and we, find the heart of God.

Scripture

Luke 6: 17-26 (NRSVUE)

He came down with them and stood on a level place with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. ¹⁸ They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases, and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹ And everyone in the crowd was trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

²⁰ Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. ²¹ "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

²² "Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you[a] on account of the Son of Man. ²³ Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven, for that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

²⁴ "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. ²⁵ "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.

²⁶ "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

Discussion Questions

1. What is your experience with the word *blessed*? Where and how is the word commonly used? How did your understanding of the word *blessed* change or expand after hearing the sermon?
2. The beatitudes are not a list of instructions we need to meet to be blessed. They are performative—the pronouncement of the blessing is actually what confers the blessing itself (paraphrased from *Accidental Saints*). What do we think that means? What is the power of a spoken, conferred blessing?
3. Why are people so hellbent on putting the ten commandments in state buildings and schoolhouses? What keeps people from demanding that the beatitudes be posted in those same places?

4. Pastor Ron said: "in [his] opinion the commandments don't belong in state buildings because [he] doesn't want judges and school boards interpreting scripture. The Church is to help us interpret and live out the commandments. The state doesn't get to do 'our' (the church's) job." That got a reaction from the room. What are your thoughts about this?
5. How did Paston Ron describe and define the "woes"?
6. What is a 'blessing' from God? A blessing is not just shared, it is given. What's the difference? How does the faith community give *God's* blessing to others?

Closing Prayer

Holy God, we are aware that throughout the scriptures there are stories of the way you bless the poor, the downtrodden, the sick, and the oppressed. In our baptism, we know that you call us to also bless those who are being denounced as dispensable and unworthy. Give us the courage to be voices that call for justice and for peace in your name. Help us to be a community where no one is left to suffer alone, and where we will remember together that *your* voice will have the final word.

May we, your church, be unflinching in taking a stand against principalities and powers of evil. May we boldly declare, like Jesus, that the poor, the hungry, those who weep, those who are excluded, **are** indeed blessed and a holy and valued part of your kingdom. May we do all these things, in the name of Jesus, the one who gave the blessings to us, as one of us. Amen.

"You are blessed, because if you are with God, you are close to God's heart."