

Plain Talk from Jesus I

LUKE 6:17-26 (NRSV) *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. <sup>18</sup>They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. <sup>19</sup>And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. <sup>20</sup>Then he looked up at his disciples and said:*

*“Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God.  
<sup>21</sup>“Blessed are you who are hungry now,  
for you will be filled.  
“Blessed are you who weep now,  
for you will laugh.*

*<sup>22</sup>“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. <sup>23</sup>Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.*

*<sup>24</sup>“But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have received your consolation.*

*<sup>25</sup>“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.*

*<sup>26</sup>“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.*

Luke's "Sermon on the Plain" gets less press than Matthew's "Sermon on the Mount." There are some differences. Matthew is a Jew, writing in Aramaic or Hebrew, to Jewish converts who would be steeped in the same traditions and spiritual heritage as Jesus. Luke is a Gentile. He joined Paul mid-way through his second missionary journey a quarter century after Jesus' crucifixion. He's writing in Greek to a Greco-Roman audience to whom Judaism is foreign.

And yet, the two texts are similar enough that many scholars believe we're dealing with some of the most authentic reports in the gospels—possibly even "direct access"—to "Jesus' message"—the concepts, at least, if not verbatim words.

Still, a careful reading of Luke's "Sermon on the Plain," compared with Matthew's "Sermon on the Mount," confirms that an essential part of understanding each text is to recognize that both Matthew and Luke have shaped the material very carefully—without changing the core of the message—to address the needs of their own communities. After all, that is the fundamental task of preaching.

This is the first of two sermons from Luke's "Sermon on the Plain"—"Plain Talk from Jesus". The focus today is "The Beatitudes."

There are many beatitudes in the Bible. Three of today's four Lectionary readings contain a beatitude. In a superficial reading, they seem to differ. In the Jeremiah text, "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord" (17:7). In Psalm 1: "Happy are those ... [whose] delight is in the law of the Lord" (1:1-2). In Luke: "Blessed are" the poor, the hungry, the grieving, the persecuted..." Different approach.

Luke's beatitudes differ from Matthew's. In the ancient Middle East, beatitudes were common, and usually were a contrasting list of "blessings" and "curses,"

or “blessings” and “woes.” Matthew doesn’t include any “Woes,” while Luke, who is not steeped in the ancient Middle Eastern formula, does.

Even though Luke is a *Gentile*, he seems to have a firm grasp of Judaism. I think we can infer the influence of Paul: highly educated Pharisee, student of the famed Gamaliel, who was grandson and protégé of the revered Hillel the Elder. Luke also was highly educated—a physician, and therefore an apt student under Paul’s tutelage.

It is my conviction that Luke wrote both his *Gospel* and the *Acts of the Apostles*, at least in part as Paul’s legal defense in Rome. Paul was charged with starting a new religion. The official religion of Rome was the worship of the Empire—personified in the emperor. Rome tolerated previously existing religions, but it was a capital offense to begin a new religion. A faction in the Jerusalem church, called “Judaizers” brought charges, and Paul was brought before the Roman Procurator, Porcius Festus. He appealed to Caesar and was sent to Rome.

A major theme of Luke’s writing, both in the *Gospel* and in the *Acts of the Apostles*, is that Christianity is not a new religion, but rather an authentic fulfillment of Judaism. That comes through clearly in several of Jesus’ statements like, “...*it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one stroke of a letter in the law to be dropped.*” (16:17) Or in a post-resurrection appearance: “*These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.*” (24:44)

And so, as we examine these biblical “beatitudes”, I hope you gain an appreciation for the complex nature of Bible study. Here we have a *Gentile*, writing to a *Gentile* audience, whose beatitudes more closely relate to the ancient Middle Eastern tradition than Matthew’s, who is a Jew, writing to a Jewish audience. Why? Remember the three most important elements in understanding Scripture: context, context, and context.

If Luke is writing to demonstrate that neither Jesus nor Paul is starting a new religion, wouldn’t he want to connect the dots—wouldn’t he want to show Jesus—and Paul—standing firmly on the foundation of Judaism?

So we have beatitudes: proclaimed through the Scriptures by people from a diversity of historic and cultural contexts and shaped very carefully to address the needs of specific communities. In today’s Lectionary readings:

Jeremiah prophesies during the final generation before Babylonian forces overran Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. The last chapter in Jeremiah is thought by some to be an eyewitness account of the fall of Jerusalem.

The writing is on the wall. Babylon is rising. The alliance between Assyria, Egypt, and Judah had failed; and the fortified cities of Judah were overrun. All that remained was Jerusalem, and Jerusalem was under siege. Jeremiah cries out:

JEREMIAH 17:5-10 (NRSV) Thus says the Lord:

Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals  
and make mere flesh their strength,  
whose hearts turn away from the Lord.

<sup>6</sup>They shall be like a shrub in the desert,  
and shall not see when relief comes...

<sup>7</sup>Blessed are those who trust in YHWH,  
whose trust is YHWH.

<sup>8</sup>They shall be like a tree planted by water,  
sending out its roots by the stream...

...in the year of drought it is not anxious,  
and it does not cease to bear fruit.

The seductions of human self-sufficiency are compelling. Humans have walked on the moon; but "Blessed are those who trust in YHWH..."

The first word in the Psalms is "happy."

Happy are those  
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,  
or take the path that sinners tread,  
or sit in the seat of scoffers; ...

<sup>3</sup>They are like trees  
planted by streams of water,  
which yield their fruit in its season...

The consensus of Bible scholarship is that Psalm 1 is placed intentionally as a preface to the entire psalter. It's in that sense of contrasting the "the way of the righteous" versus "the way of the wicked" that we can read Luke's beatitudes:

Blessings/Happiness	Curses/Woes
v. 20 the poor	v. 24 the rich
v. 21 the hungry	v. 25 the full
v. 21 those who weep	v. 25 those who laugh
v. 22 those who are hated	v. 26 those of whom people speak well

But, in all the beatitudes in these texts—and, I think, throughout scripture—the blessings and the curses—there is a consistent message: human happiness and/or misery cannot be separated from the commitments of our hearts.

Paraphrasing J. Clinton McCann of Eden Theological Seminary, to be happy in Hebrew terms is to entrust one's life to God, to conform one's life to God's values, to depend on God as the sufficient resource for facing life's worst. "In short," writes McCann, "happiness is not a reward but, rather, the result of choosing to live for God."

Clearly the biblical definition of happiness differs from what our contemporary culture promotes as happiness, which essentially is a self-centered gospel of Ayn Rand, rather than a Christ-centered gospel the clearest statement of which is "Seek first the kingdom of God, and God's righteousness, and everything else will find its proper place," and most clearly demonstrated when Jesus washed his disciples' feet. Prayer Slide

February 13, 2022

## **Pastoral Prayer**

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