

Sermon on the Plain – Part 1
Matthew 5:3-12, 39-48, **Luke 6:20-36**

And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied. “Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. “Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.

“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. “Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry. “Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. “Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.

“But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.

“If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. (English Standard Version – ESV)

Background:

- Some of Jesus’ disciples, who had not been economically poor became poor to follow him (Luke 18:28). Behind Luke’s “poor” and Matthew’s “poor in spirit” probably lies a particular Aramaic term that means both. The “poor” (6:20) had become a designation for the pious in some Jewish circles, because they were the oppressed who trusted solely in God.

- Being “satisfied” (6:21) was a hoped-for blessing of the messianic era. Hunger struck poor families in times of famine (the situation in rural Palestine was better than that of rural Egypt, but worse than that of Corinth or Italy). Weeping was a sign of mourning or repentance.

- The Old Testament tradition that most true prophets suffered rejection was amplified further in Judaism, so Jesus’ hearers would have caught his point. The separation or ostracism here might allude to being officially put out of the synagogue, but is probably meant more generally.

- “Consolation” (6:24) was a blessing of the messianic era (see Isaiah 40:1). Most of Jesus’ hearers were poor, but Luke’s urban, Greco-Roman readership was probably better off (1:3-4). Luke pulls no punches for his own audience. Laughter was often associated with scorn.

- Greek philosophers, who often scoffed at the opinions of the masses, sometimes complained if the multitudes spoke well of them; Jesus' comparison with the prophets is even more appropriate (6:26). Although hearers often suspected some truth in the genuine prophets' claims (Jeremiah 21:1-2; 37:3; 42:2), false prophets were usually more popular (Jeremiah 5:31; 23:13-14).

- The Old Testament commanded love of neighbor (Leviticus 19:18), but no one commanded "love of enemies" (6:27).

- Although Jesus and his followers practiced this rule of blessing and praying for enemies (6:27), prayers for vindication by vengeance were common in the OT (2 Chron. 24:22; Psalm 137:7-9).

- The blow on the right cheek (6:29) was the most grievous insult in the ancient Near East. The clothing in the verse refers to the outer and inner cloak, respectively; the poorest of people might have only one of each. Therefore, Jesus refers to absolute nonresistance on one's own behalf.

- Ideas like loving enemies and lending without hoping to receive again were unheard of (6:35), although many Pharisees advocated peace with the Roman state (at least, tolerating enemies).

- In the Roman world, interest rates sometimes ran as high as 48 percent, but the Old Testament forbade usury, or charging interest. Jewish teachers found a way to circumvent Jewish law so the poor could borrow so long as they repaid. Jesus argues that this practice is unnecessary, and that those with resources should help those without, whether or not they would lose money doing so.

- Biblical laws about lending to the poor before the year of release (Deuteronomy 15:9; every 70th year debts were forgiven) support Jesus' teaching, but Jesus goes farther in emphasizing unselfish giving. Although the law limited selfishness, Jesus looks to the heart of the law and advocates sacrifice for one's neighbor.

- The notion that human mercy should reflect God's mercy became a common Jewish saying. "Merciful" (6:36) may reflect the same Aramaic word translated "perfect" in Matthew 5:48.

Questions:

+ Jesus says, "blessed are you who are poor." Who is he talking about? What does he mean? Regarding those "who are hungry now," why are they hungry? How will they be satisfied? Regarding those "who weep now," why are they weeping? What will cause them to laugh? Why should believers in Jesus rejoice for being hated, excluded and reviled on his account? How does persecution on earth result in a great reward in heaven? What is the reward? What is the meaning of the three "woes" in Luke 6:25-26? How do they apply to you?

+ The Jesus commands in Luke 6:27-31 are counter intuitive. How is such behavior possible? Which command in vv. 27-31 is hardest for you, and why? How and when will you act on it? Jesus says, "love your enemies." Who is your enemy? How will you show love to him/her? Jesus says, "lend, expecting nothing in return." Who can benefit from you in that way now? Jesus says, "be merciful." Who needs to experience mercy from you? How will you show it?