

## Luke 6:20 – 49 Sermon on the Plain

The second half of Luke 6 contains a sermon that is very much like the Sermon on the Mount that is recorded in Matthew chapters 5 through 7. Obviously, this account is a lot shorter. Plus, this presentation in Luke is described as being delivered on a plain, whereas the one in Matthew is characterized as the Sermon on the Mount. We should not find it unusual that Jesus would use the same sermon more than once. Travel was much more difficult in those days, so moving as little as 20 miles would produce a whole new audience.

Since this is a sermon rather a description of Jesus' interactions with people, we will change from looking at Jesus' character to looking at Jesus' teaching. When Jesus' taught, He was not like the rabbis of that day in that He did not refer to the writings of famous rabbis or even to the Law and the prophets. Rather, He talked about what was true, what was real, how to make life on earth work. That is why people were so fascinated. They could understand what He was saying easily, even if the application might have seemed a bit beyond their ability to execute – which pretty much characterizes people today. The promises of God often sound too good to be true, which is to be expected since God deals in the humanly impossible. If we can do it, He leaves it for us to do. So, as we go through this lesson, we do not need to struggle with putting ourselves in this ancient scene, because the same scenarios still happen today, every day.

Here's the first one: how to be above the cares of this life (20 – 23). Obviously, many, many people want to be able to do that. They feel that life has them trapped, that everything is going wrong, that a meaningful life on this earth is unattainable. Many turn to a little yellow pill, as the Rolling Stones put it. This first paragraph starts each line with "blessed," which, when used as a noun or an adjective, meant to be above the cares of everyday life. When used as a verb (which comes from a completely different Greek word, the one from which we get the word, eulogy), it means to say good things about someone or something. So, here's how Jesus got the attention of the crowd, just as He did in the Sermon on the Mount: how to be above the cares of this life (20 – 23)

*Then 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."*

I'm sure that most in the crowd were going, "Say what?" But these short lines are easy to remember, and those who cared about God would ponder them while they went about their work. How can the poor be above the cares of this life? The poor are the first to be affected by political or natural disasters. The poor are closer to that edge where everything falls apart. Remember that John the Baptist and Jesus had been focused on preparing the faithful of Israel for the soon-to-be revealed eternal kingdom about which many of the prophets had written. And, Isaiah 61:1 – 3 specified that this great message of the Messiah would go specifically to the poor, not the powerful, not the religious leaders of the day – the poor. Jesus was telling them, "Consider yourselves fortunate, set aside the anxieties of life, because that promised eternal kingdom is about to happen."

OK. So the poor of that day had something to which to look forward. The promised eternal kingdom would become fully realized in less than 40 years, and would begin in less than three. But how does that relate to us? That kingdom is here. We don't even have to wait until Acts 2 rolls around. This kingdom that has been around almost 2000 years is a safe haven for the ordinary person, for the bottom of the economic heap. In contrast, those who pursue comfort as though it will bring them satisfaction will never find it, but, those who focus on that now-existing kingdom can legitimately get through a life worth living without anxiety. Whatever adversity we encounter, God can handle it. He has not promised that the poor will become rich; Solomon already revealed in Ecclesiastes that goals of health and wealth are "vanity and chasing after the wind."

"Above the cares of this life are you who hunger now." Being hungry can ruin your day. Hunger was a common problem among the poor, and still is in much of the world. Obviously, Jesus was not promising "a chicken in every pot." He and His disciples often were hungry. The apostles, too. But, those who focus on this eternal kingdom will rise above the difficulties of life. Whatever the outcome on earth, the eternal kingdom is fantastic, so how do the anxieties of this life stack up by comparison? When you are hungry, that short beatitude may ring hollow. A sincere faith that God will do what is best is a necessary attitude to make God's system work.

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh." Solomon wrote that same thing in Ecclesiastes 7, that the wise learn from grief, not laughter. 2 Corinthians 1 talks about the comfort we receive from God and from each other. When in the midst of grief, we can overcome by looking forward to those promises.

And the last beatitude in this speech, blessed, above the cares of this life, are you when people persecute you for your faith. Rejoice because you are in good company. Look what happened to the prophets, the apostles, the early Christians, and of course, Jesus. I find it strange, irrational really, that people get so upset if you do not agree with them. Whether in politics or in religion, many insist that you must think like they think, never considering that you are not asking them to imitate you, just to leave you alone to pursue what is true and real. They are free to destroy themselves through self-deception.

Jesus goes on with the counterpoint to those previous statements about being above the cares of this life with how to set yourself up for futility (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."*

I'm sure you remember the Old Milwaukee Beer commercial, "It doesn't get any better than this." The comedian, Dennis Miller, responded, "If that's true, just put a pistol in my mouth now." Certainly, a notable number of people have sought and achieved significant wealth. They will be comfortable for the rest of their lives. But, that's as good as it is going to get. They do not have what the eternal kingdom offers: a big family composed of trusting and trustworthy people who are all selfless, a big family that will last. Their achievements may crumble before they die; certainly after. And, be careful of basking in the glow of public popularity. Look at history. The next generation or the one after that will pick you apart by judging you by their standards instead of the ones in place during the time of your achievement. People of this world, who fail to pursue what is true and real, love to pick apart heroes of the past, probably because they are not here to defend themselves.

So, if we do opt for the pursuit of reality resulting in the eternal kingdom, what will be there that is so enticing? Of course, this will only make sense to those who are other-centered, who are selfless, but Jesus told them that satisfaction is found in paying it forward. Jesus called it, being merciful. (27 – 36). One definition before we get into it: mercy. Mercy is one step beyond compassion, to include a compelling desire to fix what caused the original problem. I think the biggest act of mercy in the Bible is the indwelling Spirit who is given to every faithful person. It is great that we are redeemed, our debts to justice have been paid. It is great that God also forgives, trusts us again. But, without step three, the indwelling Spirit, we would just be forgiven failures, continuing to fail again and again until we die, and we'll probably mess that up, too. The major job of that indwelling Spirit is character transformation, repairing the ethical framework we have bent significantly over the years.

Jesus said that satisfaction is found in paying it forward, in being merciful (27 – 36):

*“But I say to you who hear: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless [say good things about] those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you. To him who strikes you on the one cheek, offer the other also. And from him who takes away your cloak, do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who asks of you. And from him who takes away your goods do not ask them back. And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise.”*

*“But if you love those who love you, what credit 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 credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive back, what credit is that to you? For even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much back. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil. Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful.”*

That first paragraph sounds like a recipe for being a patsy. Many unbelievers will see you as an easy mark. But, we should not use that little bit of reality as an excuse to act badly. Instead, use your liberty – that's a big subject in the New Testament. You get to choose what you are going to do – just make sure what you are doing is good and right. So, when the people of the world treat you badly, do not react to them; react to God. Do what is right and in the best interests of all – generally not what the outsider wants you to do, but rather what is true and right. Usually, when an outsider wants to take advantage of you, going along because they asked is not best for them. Do what's best for the other, love, don't feed their manipulative ways.

Jesus warned His audience that staying away from those who use you is not a reasonable strategy. You are still letting the other person control you. That's what outsiders do in order to protect their own little worlds. Rather, imitate God. God does not retaliate in the moment, but lets it go until Judgment. And it is not the sins themselves He lets go, since Jesus already paid for them; He paid the debts to justice for all people, not just the nice folks (1 John 2:2). As Romans 2:4 says, “It is the kindness of God that calls you to repentance.” God sets about to fix people, if they will only accept the help. Those who spitefully use us have internal conflicts we can't see, but must be eating them up. God's response, and hopefully ours, is to figure out the source of the bad behavior and fix the root cause, rather than devolving into armed conflict.

Moving on the Jesus' next point, see yourself in others (37 – 42):

*“Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you.”*

*And He spoke a parable to them: “Can the blind lead the blind? Will they not both fall into the ditch? A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is perfectly trained will be like his teacher. And why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not perceive the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Brother, let me remove the speck that is in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the plank that is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck that is in your brother’s eye.”*

A shortcoming of just about everyone is expecting others to be better than themselves, or to excuse myself from adopting the same behaviors that I expect to see in others. English translators have chosen to use the word, judge, although that word can be used a number of ways, resulting in some convoluted logic about what the Bible says.

Note that Jesus, in that poetic literary style of Hebrew Poetry, used condemn as a parallel to what He meant by judge. We make judgments about many things that are not condemning. Many times, we judge things in positive ways, like when we select a product from among many options. We expect juries to judge based on the evidence that has been presented to them. So, Jesus reminds His audience that, before we condemn someone, we should ask ourselves if we think that, if we were in the other person’s situation, we could have done as well, or if we could have at least done better than they did. The judging Jesus references could also be called hypocrisy.

Jesus addressed condemning, forgiving, and giving. I suspect He could have expanded the list to any situation in which we react badly to the behavior of another, not considering that, if I had done that, I would have been kicking myself for being such a failure. We should see ourselves in our evaluations of others.

In fact, Jesus closes out this short lesson with exactly that point; be consistent (43 – 49):

*“For a good tree does not bear bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. For every tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they gather grapes from a bramble bush. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.”*

*“But why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do the things which I say? Whoever comes to Me, and hears My sayings and does them, I will show you whom he is like: He is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when the flood arose, the stream beat vehemently against that house, and could not shake it, for it was founded on the rock. But he who heard and did nothing is like a man who built a house on the earth without a foundation, against which the stream beat vehemently; and immediately it fell. And the ruin of that house was great.”*

To extend the good tree / bad tree illustration just a bit further, tying good fruit on a dead tree does not make the tree good and, in fact, probably will result in spoiling the good fruit because it gets left on the tree too long so the passers-by can admire the fruit. That’s where

many people go wrong with the obedience idea expressed in “not do the things which I say.” Certainly, the Pharisees missed that point. They were all about performance without addressing the basic nature of the person. Some denominations today are the same way, focusing on their practices and on morality without addressing the character that allows good things to happen on a consistent basis.

Without the transformation of the character by the indwelling Spirit, we have to get our fruit from Michael’s, you know, the plastic kind. Further, that transformation is characterized by Jesus as a deep and solid foundation for life. The fruit illustration addresses the products of good trees, shrubs, and vines. The house illustration takes it a step further in addressing how we may negotiate the trials of life on a consistent basis, whatever comes. Even a good fruit tree can be damaged by wind or hail or drought. A solid foundation withstands the storms.

Biblical faith makes that solid foundation. For an unfortunate fraction of good, honest church-goers, faith is a religion word that denotes no more than party affiliation. Biblical faith incorporates understanding the evidence behind the promises so that the teachings of Jesus are the only reasonable answer. The promises of the outside world, while sorely tempting to many, have no evidence that they have even a marginal chance of working. It’s like socialism. Presented to impressionable 18 to 22 year-olds by eloquent old men with titles, it makes sense. But no one yet has ever made it work. As Margaret Thatcher said, “At some point, you run out of other people’s money.” Jesus’ ways work all the time, under any political or economic system, no matter the level of corruption.

But, we need to understand the nature of sacrifice, so Jesus’ sacrifice can make sense, so that we can become living sacrifices as Paul put it in Romans 12. We need hope that is defined as a confident expectation, not wishful thinking. We need to accept the Word of God as true. When we find problem area, we need to conclude that, since the Word itself is true, the problem must be in my translation or understanding of it. We need to act on those promises, not just use them as platitudes. If we actually believe, then we must speak (2 Corinthians 4:13). We must grow in faith, not feeling like we have arrived because we made some initial declaration, but rather seeing a constant development within ourselves.

Jesus’ speeches drew huge crowds because His good news made sense – not that it was easy, but it was thought-provoking and complete, food for a starving spirit.