

*“The Sermon on the Plain”*  
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<sup>17</sup>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.

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*Be among us now, O God, as Jesus was with the people on that level place long ago. Minister to our needs. Speak your dream. And inspire us to make it a reality. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together be acceptable in your sight, O God, our rock, our redeemer, and our friend. Amen.*

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I'd like to begin this morning by offering just a word of context for this reading from Luke's gospel. Luke tells us that prior to speaking these famous words, Jesus had been up a mountain praying about which of his many followers would become the twelve disciples. He made his choice and named the twelve. Then, he came down the mountain and began to preach. If this text sounds familiar, it's probably because you've heard it before! In fact, Matthew tells a similar story in his gospel. However, instead of coming down the mountain to preach, Jesus goes up the mountain and the famed "Sermon on the Mount" is preached. Luke's version is not as popular. Perhaps it's because "Sermon on the Plain" just doesn't pop the way "Sermon on the Mount" does. Or perhaps it's because in Luke's version there are only 4 beatitudes as opposed to Matthew's 8. Or perhaps it's because of what Jesus says after he finishes his short list of the "Blessed are."

Honestly though, his sermon is a bit weird from the beginning:

*"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."*

"Really Jesus?" a member of his audience might have thought. "I'm not feeling particularly blessed right now. After all, I'm poor, I'm hungry, I'm grieving, and I'm hated. Kinda feels like I drew the short straw when God was passing out blessings." It's a valid point, right?

In Jesus' day, blessings were seen as a direct indication of divine favor and divine favor was garnered by righteous living. It was simple "cause and effect." If you were wealthy, healthy, and happy, it was because you were a good person. If you were poor, hungry, grieving, and hated, it was because you deserved to be. Remember Job? When he'd lost everything in the world there was to lose, his friends struck another blow, "What did you do to deserve this? You must've made God really unhappy."

God called their counsel “words without knowledge” and declared that they had kindled the divine wrath.

While the elite, the wealthy, the religious, and the powerful looked down on this crowd with contempt, Jesus came down the mountain, joined them on the level place, touched their inflicted bodies, and tended their injured spirits. Then he said something truly radical. He called them blessed.

If only he’d stopped there! If he would have stopped there this would be a much easier, more comfortable sermon to preach and to hear. If he would have stopped there we could leave this house of worship and go back to our relatively comfortable lives. If he would have stopped there, Jesus would not be requiring anything of us. But he didn’t. And he does.

*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.*

Those lines, I think, are the reason Luke’s “Sermon on the Plain” is somewhat less popular than Matthew’s “Sermon on the Mount.” Because they accuse. They indict. They curse. To all those puffed up with self-righteousness, inflated with power and self-importance Jesus says, “So you think you’re blessed? You think because you have money and power; because you’re enjoying the good life while others suffer; because the flame of your ego is hot with victory while the poor, the hungry, the stranger, the widow, the orphan, the sick, and the grieving have never known anything but defeat? You think you’re blessed? Woe to you.”

The “Sermon on the Plain” is “a statement of the world turned upside down, where those who mourn are comforted rather than abandoned or merely pitied, where those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are satisfied, not ignored or shouted down, where the meek inherit the earth rather than being ground into dust.”<sup>1</sup> This is an indictment of all who

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Hinkle Shore, "It's the Indicatives, Stupid!" *Pilgrim Preaching: Readings for Preachers and Others*, November 1, 2003

attribute their personal or national success to divine favor. This is a cosmic role reversal, Jesus claimed, with the prophets before him, that God's is a preferential option for the poor, the sick, the grieving, the widowed or orphaned, the outsider, the marginalized or cast aside. They are the ones who will be truly blessed because they are the ones for whom the realm of heaven comes. Any word to the contrary is, as it says in Job, a word "without knowledge" and kindles the divine wrath.

So, which are we? The poor or the rich? The hungry or the full? The weeping or the laughing? The despised or the adored? The blessed or the cursed? I honestly don't know. What I do know is that when we look at ourselves—at our blessings—as some form of divine stamp of approval, we're making a big mistake. And when we look at our struggles as evidence that we are being punished, or tested, or ignored, we couldn't be further from the truth. When we look down on the struggles of others or offer meaningless platitudes to the grieving, the dregs of our pantries to the hungry, silent judgement to single parents, or troubled teens, or wary immigrants, Jesus says, "Woe to you."

I do know that the Jesus that went down the mountain onto the level place where the torn and broken, the hurting and hungry, the grieving and gravelling of humanity waited in hope for relief—that Jesus calls us onto the level place to provide that relief. For far too long, the "Sermon on the Mount" has informed our model of ministry to those in need. Jesus calls us down from our lofty perch and onto the plain where the rest of humanity waits for relief.

The beatitudes from "Sermon on the Mount" are SO much easier to preach. But as I think of the world we live in right now, the world where the torn and broken, the hurting and hungry, the grieving and gravelling of humanity wait on the plain longing for relief, the "Sermon on the Plain" is the one we need to hear. May the Kingdom of God come to the humanity on the plain and may ours be the hands that bear it. Amen.