

Sermon on the Plain

Over the years I've heard a lot of sermons on the Beatitudes, found in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel. I've not heard as many on what's known as the Sermon on the Plain in Luke's Gospel. Some of them sound familiar, but aren't quite the same. So this morning we're going to take a look at a part of the Sermon on the Plain, at what Jesus says is important. If you have a Bible or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Luke 6:17-26. **Read Luke 6:17-26.**

Our Gospel lesson opens this morning right after the twelve apostles have been chosen and appointed by Jesus, and they're all coming down the mountain. Luke records:

He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of His disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, who had come to hear Him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, and the people all tried to touch Him, because power was coming from Him and healing them all, (Luke 6:17-19).

He's walking down the mountain with the apostles, and He's reaching out, healing all sorts of sick people. They're crowding around Him, trying to touch Him, or get a better view. I want this to really click today for us. These are people who are sick – maybe with leprosy – they're folks who can't be around friends and family because they might pass their cooties to somebody. Good Jewish people aren't there. The crowd is the riffraff, and maybe the working class, ordinary people who are curious to see what sort of shenanigans might be going on.

The Price is Right!

I envision this as being kind of like the audience on the game show "The Price is Right!" Have you ever seen that show? It's been on TV since 1956. Sometime this month they'll release their 10,000th episode. On the show, contestants play different games where they have to guess the correct price of different items. Sometimes it's hard for them to decide what the right price is. They have to have a very good sense of the value of things.

I used to like watching it when Bob Barker was the host. There was a lady on there once who had to unscramble the price tags to win, and she put a \$5.49 tag on a box of macaroni and cheese. Even with inflation, a single box of that doesn't cost that much! We may laugh about some of the antics of the contestants on the show, but I wonder, how much money would a person give – or what would a person give – to be healed from their diseases?

Or to be freed and cured from impure spirits? There are people today who spend great sums of money for treatment of diseases, and they aren't wrong in doing it – things are terribly over-priced. I think most people want to be healthy, to have a good quality of life – and that's a good thing. There's nothing wrong with that. We should want for all people to be healthy and well, because that's what Jesus would do, if He were here in our skins. He would be doing things not to treat an illness, but to completely cure the disease!

It's also important for us to catch this from the story – Jesus didn't charge the folks a dime for His treatment, He gave them the cure – for free! In fact, Jesus is so powerful, that just touching Him – just reaching out and touching the threads of His cloak – is enough to completely cure and eliminate any disease. There's another Bible story found in Matthew 9, Mark 5, and Luke 8, about a woman who had a problem where she had been bleeding for twelve years. By just touching Jesus' clothing, the woman was immediately healed – and she had spent every dime she had on doctors trying to find relief, but they couldn't do anything for her. Only Jesus could.

Meet the Need, then Teach

Jesus is still in the healing – the curing – business. I also want us to catch this fact from the passage. Notice the order of how things were done. He sees the immediate need and answers it. There's no "listen to me preach and teach, and then I'll give you what you want." That's often how we, as the institutionalized Church, do it. Maybe Jesus shows us a better way here. He meets the people's need, and then the teaching and preaching begins.

The Gospel is an example of this. Here's what I mean. When we realize we've sinned, and we need Jesus, we come to the cross, and through faith we lay claim to what He did there through His death on the cross for us. His shed blood becomes the cleaning agent for our souls. He washes our sins away. And then, we come to the empty tomb and His resurrection.

In the empty tomb, where our sins were buried with Christ, there is no body. We find that we've been set free to really live. He lives, and so because He lives, He proves He's capable of doing all the work of cleansing us from sin which He says He did for us on the cross. Now, the cleansing He gives us as sinners meets the immediate need. That immediate need is for forgiveness, for reconciliation and right relationships with God and other people. At the cross and empty tomb, He meets our immediate need.

And then what happens? Because we see we need Him, we get fired up about Him. We read our Bibles. We pray more. We let the Holy Spirit come in and reshape and mold us. What's all that really boil down to? Reading the Bible, praying, letting the Holy Spirit do God's work in us and through us – that's the teaching and preaching

piece. You see friends, sometimes we do things in the Church backwards from the way Jesus models how we ought to do things in the pages of Holy Scripture.

Jesus' treatment and curing of the people in our Gospel lesson today had the right price – it was completely free – just like the gift He offers each of us of a new life when we look to the cross and say, "Yes, Lord, I know You love me, and You took the nails and died for me." Then Luke records what sort of sounds like the Beatitudes recorded in Matthew's Gospel, but are not quite exactly the same. Luke writes:

Looking at His disciples, He said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh," (Luke 6:20-21).

The Poor, The Hungry, The Sad

You compare this list with Matthew's in the Sermon on the Mount, and Matthew takes a spiritual view of things, talking about the "poor in spirit," but Luke doesn't. In this text, Jesus is talking directly to the people who are down and out. The poor – meaning the people who have a little too much week left over when their paycheck runs out. Ordinary people, like us, who are scrimping and scrounging, trying to make ends meet. The poor Jesus is talking about here are the ones who don't have the money, who can't catch a break.

The hungry He's talking about aren't the people who are spiritually hungry – He's talking about the people who are physically hungry. They don't have enough food to fill their bellies. The people who weep – they're sad. If you think about it, some of this stuff goes hand-in-hand together. Being financially broke, hungry, and sad – you can see it in people's eyes if you know what to look for. I see it every time we're down at the Alpha Center.

Before I started teaching, I worked for twelve years at Kroger in the Meat Department, usually on nights. Late one night there was an older woman in the store. She was in the pet aisle, and was really struggling. I was out at the meat case, filling up the pork chops and stuff, and could see her in the reflective mirror on the top of the case. So I left what I was doing, and went to help her.

She was trying to lift a twelve pack case of Alpo canned dog food into her shopping cart, but couldn't get it over the top of the cart. I took it from her, and put it in her cart, and said, "Wow! Your dog must really like this stuff." She smiled – she only had maybe five teeth in her mouth – and said to me, "Son, I don't have any dogs. This tastes about like beef stew. When you have to decide between food and prescriptions, this is what you do." I was shocked. It was one of the saddest things I think I've ever heard in my life, and I left her standing there in the aisle and went into the back room and cried.

Rejoice in that Day

This is how some people live. The blessings Jesus promises according to Luke, are going to turn things upside down. The poor will inherit God's kingdom. The hungry will be filled. The sad will be joyful and joy-filled. Then things really take a turn. Jesus says, "Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets," (verses 22-23).

In other words, when we're following Jesus, don't be surprised if bad things happen to us, or if people don't like us. A few weeks back you may have heard about the Episcopalian bishop who preached while the president was in the crowd. He didn't like what she said in her sermon. What she said was right out of the book of Micah, "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God." People – from the top down – don't understand how important it is to be rooted in the Scripture.

Jesus then turns the tables, as He often does. He says:

Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets, (verses 24-26).

Jesus says "woe" a lot here – and it should make us also say, "whoa," as in "hold your horses!" Or pay attention and watch out for this, because it's a fairly significant warning to us. What He's saying here is, "if you're rich, you've received your comfort already and you'll have trouble; if you're well-fed, you'll have trouble and be hungry; if you're laughing, trouble's coming – you're going to weep; and if you're popular and the people like you, look out! Trouble's coming! That's how the people's ancestors treated the false prophets. This is a hard pill to swallow.

Woes (of Materialism)

If you pay attention to the "woe's," you see they all focus on worldly things. Materialism. Wealth, health, happiness, popularity. It was also the focus of the false prophets in the Old Testament who served idols, the main idol being Baal. Remember the golden calf? That was Baal. He was bad news. He reflects our human desire for wealth, prosperity, happiness, and popularity. And it's with a self-serving mindset, not a generous mindset.

Sometimes even Christians have a hard time recognizing the value of things in our everyday lives. Jesus never wants us to be confused about what's important. We aren't supposed to be focused on materialistic things – on eating the best foods when simple foods do just as well in keeping our bodies healthy, on only having fun and good

times, or on being popular. We're supposed to be focused on the important things in life.

Each day when the good Lord wakes us up, we should be thinking along these lines: How can I use what I have to help other people? Am I thinking about the food needs of others, or am I thinking only of myself? Am I sharing the burdens of people around me when they're sad? Do I help cheer them up, or do I add to their misery? Am I more worried about being popular, or being right with God?

What's Most Important

People around us – in our community, in our society, even in the Church – sometimes have really mixed up values regarding what's important in life. Some think life's a big popularity contest. It's not. Some think acquiring as much wealth as possible is what's important – even to the point of lying, cheating, and stealing from less fortunate people. If being rich is more important than being honest, they've paid too high a price.

One last story, and then I'll wrap up. There once was Spanish Duchess who lived from the 1930's to the early 2000's. In her youth, she was stunning beauty. She spent her whole life trying to be the most important, beautiful, and popular royal person in Europe. She underwent numerous plastic surgeries to improve her appearance. In the end, she looked terrible. She looked like that puppet from "Tales from the Crypt." In seeking to be the best, the most beautiful, and most glamorous, the Duchess paid too high a price.

Jesus wants us to have clarity when it comes to what's important in life. He taught this lesson to show the apostles – and us – that devoting our lives to seeking wealth, happiness, and popularity will leave us empty every time. And He tells us, that the greatest reward comes by following Him and letting Him be Lord of us. Doing that also has a price tag on it. Jesus tells us that following Him will cause other people to not like us, they may exclude us from their circle of friends, and they may talk about us behind our back. He promises us a reward in heaven, though.

Having right relationship with God has the highest price tag of all. It cost an innocent Man His life on the cross. His blood paid just the right price for you and for me to be right with God. And He has the complete cure for any issue or problem we will ever face in our lives here below.

Prayer: O God, You root those who trust in You by streams of healing water. Release us from the bonds of disease, free us from the power of evil, and turn us from falsehood and illusion, that we may find the blessing of new life in You through the power of Christ. Amen.