

A SAVIOR *for* ALL PEOPLE

A Study of Luke's Gospel



LESSON 6 Luke 6:17-49

Information for Teacher

Because of the many interpretational issues with this well-known sermon (also recorded in Matthew 5-7), this lesson will give you a large amount of background material for your benefit. Feel free to share as much or as little with your class as you see fit.

Textual Issues

There are two differences in detail and wording between Matthew's and Luke's accounts you should know, since your class will be more familiar with Matthew's version.

Sermon on the Mount/Flat Place

Interestingly, Luke doesn't refer to a mountain, but instead to a "level place" (6:17 NIV). Your class may immediately notice this. Three things will help explain this:

1. Geographically, it is certainly possible to stand on a level place on the side of a mountain. So Matthew and Luke are not necessarily contradictory.
2. Theologically, Luke always places Jesus on a mountain alone – the mountain is where Jesus goes to draw strength. So Luke wants to leave mountaintops alone here, since Jesus is among a crowd.
3. Symbolically, it may be that Matthew wants to present Jesus on the mountain with God, just like Moses was when he received the original Law from God, and now, Jesus is giving a new Law. Luke, however, wants to present Jesus as Moses coming down from the mountain and giving the Law to the people.

Poor in Spirit vs. Poor

It's obvious in looking at Luke and Matthew's accounts side by side that Matthew's is a much more extended recording. It's also true that the beatitudes (from the latin *beatus* – "blessed" – it has nothing to do with *attitude*, though it sounds similar) look a little different. Matthew writes "blessed are the poor in spirit" whereas Luke simply writes "blessed are the poor." We'll discuss this in the main lesson, but you should be aware of the difference and expect questions about this.

Interpretational Issues

Religious groups have historically interpreted these teachings in one of **four broad ways**:

Roman Catholic

There are two tiers of Christians: regular Christians and super-Christians, or saints. These hard teachings are only for the super-Christians, because **no regular Christian could ever follow them**.

Reformers (e.g., Martin Luther)

These teachings were given to make us feel guilty. Since **no regular Christian could ever follow them**, they're just in Scripture to remind us of how far away we are from being able to obey the commands.

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas writes,

From such a perspective, the sermon's hard sayings are at best considered "ideals" that Christians might try to achieve, but with the knowledge that whether we live or do not live the way the sermon seems to suggest we should live does not determine the character of our faith in God.⁴

Sentimental

These teachings are just about inner attitudes. Since **no regular Christian could ever follow them**, they must not be literal. Jesus couldn't expect us to actually turn the other cheek for an enemy, so it's just about an *attitude* of peace, not actually living it out.

Literal

Anabaptist (think Mennonites) and Restoration (think Stone-Campbell churches, of which the Church of Christ is a part) traditions have traditionally interpreted these teachings literally, though that thought has shifted in the past 50 years.

This interpretation does not seek to spiritualize the teachings or make them a kind of super-ethic, but instead it understands the teachings to be revolutionary and calling Jesus' followers to a higher standard, even when the teachings don't "work." In contrast to the above three, this interpretation believes that **regular Christians should indeed follow these teachings**.

Again, Hauerwas writes,

The Sermon on the Mount cannot help but become a law, an ethic, if what is taught is abstracted from the teacher. When the sermon is isolated from the one alone who is the exemplification of righteousness, it seems natural to ask if all Jesus's teachings must be followed literally. Does Jesus really think it possible for us to live without lust? How would we be able to run the world if we do not resist evildoers?⁵

⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, Brazos Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 59.

⁵ Hauerwas, 59.

Opening Discussion

- **What about Jesus most goes against the norms of society?**

Introduction

After a series of stories about what Jesus *did*, Luke now pauses to give us an account of what he *taught*. Jesus has just called his followers (disciples), and now he must teach them what it looks like to follow Jesus.

Remember that the arrival of Jesus *turned things upside down*, and these teachings will do nothing less. They are revolutionary. They don't make sense. They don't necessarily *work* (i.e., they don't fit conventional wisdom about best practices). But that doesn't matter. Followers of Jesus will act in a different manner, and that's what makes them followers.

The Biblical Text

Luke 6:17-26 (Blessings and Woes)

- Luke tells us that Jesus goes down with “**them**” (his disciples whom he has just called).
- We read in v. 20 that Jesus is **looking at his disciples** when he begins teaching. So his **primary audience is his disciples**, though it is certainly a good thing that “a great number of people” from all over the region are overhearing this conversation.
- Before he begins teaching, it seems that he **heals people and casts out demons** (6:18-19). His **teaching is accompanied by action**.
- Jesus names **four blessings**:
 - The **poor** (6:20)
 - The **hungry** (21a)
 - Those who **weep** (21b)
 - The **persecuted** (22)
- Immediately we wonder why **Matthew's version** seems spiritual, while Luke's seems physical.
 - Matthew writes of those “**poor in spirit**,” those who “hunger and thirst **for righteousness**,” etc.
 - But even Matthew's version can't be **un-linked from the physical**. Original readers would have understood “poor in spirit” to correspond with **economic status**, not just an inner attitude.
 - In the same way, Matthew's word “righteousness” can be translated “**justice**,” rendering his wording “hunger and thirst for justice.”
 - We have let Matthew's wording **distort** these teachings, leading us to think this is just all about “inner attitudes,” when in fact it is not. It is about **real, physical status**.
 - We want to separate the physical from the spiritual, but first century audiences would not have understood that separation.
 - Hunger was hunger, and it affected your **whole person**. The same goes for poverty.

- The physical meaning of this passage is **confirmed by the woes** issued later to the rich, the well fed, etc. There is no way to “spiritualize” these phrases, so we shouldn’t “spiritualize” the blessings either.
- Jesus links the conditions of poverty, hunger, mourning, and persecution to the **prophets**. Jesus’ followers stand in the tradition of the prophets, who endured these conditions as well.
- Jesus is not saying, “Try hard to be poor. Try hard to be hungry.” He’s saying something like, “Given the nature of my ministry, (outlined in Luke 4:18ff), **no one should be surprised** to find out that the poor, the hungry, the mourning, etc. are following me. These are the kinds of people that make up my kingdom.”
- To correspond with the four blessings, Luke names **four woes**:
 - The **rich** (they’ve already had plenty of comfort)
 - The **well fed**
 - The **laughing**
 - The **popular**
- Jesus has affirmed his ministry to the **sick and sinners**, not the comfortable and well off. These woes are just affirming that.

- *Which blessing or woe makes you most uncomfortable?*
- *If we make the context for today’s application global, who are the rich? Who are the poor?*

Luke 6:27-36 (Enemies)

- Jesus is just getting started with his **revolutionary** teachings.
- Now he says that his followers **love their enemies**.
- The **norm** is to love those who love you (and hate those who hate you).
- If Jesus’ followers just do that, what makes them **different**?
- Now the command is to love enemies by
 - **Doing good** do them (27)
 - **Blessing** them (28)
 - **Praying** for them (28)
 - **Allowing them to hit you** again after hitting you once already (29)
 - **Giving them more** after they steal from you (29)
 - Not **demanding** stolen things back (30)
- This is all summed up with the **golden rule**: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”
- These are **hard sayings**!
 - They do not let us off **easy**.
 - They should not necessarily make us feel **comfortable** or good about ourselves.
 - They should cause us to **evaluate our behavior** as disciples.
- Jesus calls us to a **standard higher** than the world’s. The world loves its friends and hates its enemies. Christians go **one step further**: we love even our enemies.

We must rescue the phrase “turn the other cheek.” It does NOT mean “turn a blind eye,” as in, “the bully hit me, but I just turned the other cheek and walked away.” Turning the other cheek is actively inviting more suffering instead of retaliating.

- *What is your reaction to these teachings?*
- *Do we do a good job of teaching and preaching love for enemies?*
- *Who are some enemies Christians need to love today?*
- *What are some contexts in which we need to “turn the other cheek”? Is this just a teaching for the school playground?*

Luke 6:37-42 (Judging)

- Verse 37 is one of the most well-known (and misapplied) in the text. Jesus gives two negative commands and a positive command (which is the opposite action of the first two):
 - Don't **judge**
 - Don't **condemn**
 - **Forgive**
- This passage does *not* mean
 - Don't use **discernment**
 - Don't **name sins**
 - Don't ever **confront** others about sin
- Rather, put judging alongside condemnation to help interpret its meaning. We are not to **condemn people to hell**. We are not to **take God's place** as judge and jury. Instead, we should forgive. If we do, then we set ourselves up for **scrutiny**.
- Skipping to verse 41, Jesus points out the **absurdity** of being judgmental and condemning when one has one's own problems.
- The ancient audience would have seen the **humor** in one person looking at another, condemning someone's speck of wood while a large piece of wood protruded from his/her own eyes.
- Jesus *does* **affirm** the need to remove the speck from another's eye. He simply teaches that we must **remove our own planks first**.

- *What are some common ways people judge specks while having their own planks?*
- *What kinds of “specks” tend to draw our improper judgment most often?*
- *What does “allowed” judging look like?*

Application

Read Luke 6:43-49

- Jesus states that his followers will bear “good fruit,” and links our good fruit (actions, behaviors, words, outcomes) with what's in our heart (43-45).
- Jesus also teaches the importance of putting his words into practice. This builds a good foundation that can withstand a storm. Hearing teachings without putting them into practice ends up building a flimsy house with no real foundation (46-49).
- Jesus indicates that confessing him as Lord ought to lead his followers to obey him (46). This is a direct connection that many often miss. They confess him but don't follow his teachings.
- Ironically, the teachings preceding the message about the importance of applying are often the teachings we apply least!

- *As a class, spend some time reflecting on the blessings & woes and the teachings on enemy-love and judgment. What are 3-5 things everyone needs to do differently this week?*
- *What teachings from this week would be easy to ignore, hearing but not following?*
- *Reflect on the relationship between following Jesus and obeying him.*

Next Week's Text

Luke 7:1-50