

**Sermon**  
**McCarter Presbyterian Church**  
**7th Sunday after Epiphany**  
February 24, 2019

**Old Testament Lesson**

Psalm 37:3-11

**NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon**

Luke 6:27-38 NRSV

Then he looked up at 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 will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. 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. “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. “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. “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you. “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

**Something Big: Reversing the Order**

Our scripture lesson includes a collection of verses that often are called **the Beatitudes**. I think the first time I heard the term “Beatitudes,” I thought somehow that they were related to the Andy Griffith show, because of the characters: Sheriff Taylor, Opie, and **Aunt Bee**. To me, Aunt Bee always had an “**attitude**,” typically fretful and unpleasant. Of course, that was a child’s approach to a very significant scripture reading. The language and the **deeper meanings** of the text likely escaped me at the time. I was a child and unable to grasp the full meaning of a text like we have today. But now, with the passing of much time, I am not sure that we adults fully listen to **the message** it contains.

Very often these verses are called the “Sermon on the Plain” in the *Gospel of Luke*. They also are summarized as “Four Blessings and Four Woes.” Indeed, a quick read of the verses would reveal that very thing. But, if we limit ourselves to this all-too-brief summary, very likely we will miss out on the deeper, more **meaningful message** at the heart of today’s scripture lesson. In fact, we can easily take a simple approach to the Beatitudes and attach these commands from Jesus onto the **Ten Commandments** from the time of Moses. The resulting merger becomes a **summary** of life-lessons: an all-powerful prescription to **salvation**.

That approach will work just fine for many people. But, we might compare that process to our government’s founding in adding the **Bill of Rights** to the Constitution. These first Ten Amendments to the Constitution supplemented, but did not replace, the **U.S. Constitution**. And, they were not the last amendments, there are seventeen more. Even the amendments are not complete, because they do not contain our **Federal law**. In much the same way, these Beatitudes, as they are called, are not intended to serve as supplemental laws or rules. However, they do give us a starting point for a **fresh look** at God and **our response** to God. And, I believe that what the intent of Jesus in giving them to us.

Here in this message from Christ we learn that the weight of **grace and mercy** are much greater, deeper, and far more powerful than **a list** to guide our living. This is why the remainder of the scripture lesson is so important. All of these **commands**, even demands, from Jesus are aimed at **transforming** who we are: adjusting or recreating our **value system**, refocusing our attention and **priorities**, and moving us from members of the crowd into active and earnest **disciples** of Jesus Christ. And, we know this, because Jesus makes a pretty practical analysis of all of the **successful people** of the time, religious and otherwise, who seem satisfied with their lives, their personal situations, and **their status**. He even includes a special category of those who appear to be even more “holy” than the other people around them.

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.”

Luke 6:32-33 NRSV

Jesus spoke these words to get the **attention** of the crowd. Around him were faithful Jews, perhaps some **Pharisees**. The mere mention of these opponents of Jesus typically brings in negative thoughts and comments. But, before we all start clucking our tongues and shaking our heads at the mention of the Pharisees, let us remind ourselves that these were the folks trying to follow the **Law of Moses** as closely as possible. They were very **dedicated to their religion** and were leaders in the communities of Palestine. Today, we could compare them to any number of prominent people in our community, such as many Presbyterians and Episcopalians and, perhaps, even ourselves. Also present were the **common people**: those too poor to keep all the religious holidays and observances and who found it difficult to keep all the of the **Jewish laws**, because these peasants worked hard every day just to **survive**.

Likely, there were **Greeks**, non-Jews, in the crowd. Some of them **admired** Judaism. These merchants and other professionals were fascinated by this concept of the **single God** whom the Jews worshiped so faithfully. These Greeks, and others learning about Judaism, were called **proselytes**. They kept as many of the laws as they could and attended **the synagogues** and visited the **temple** in Jerusalem. And, later in the ministry of Jesus, we will encounter the affluent, or rich, **Jewish rulers** and nobles attending these gatherings around Jesus. These “top tier” people did not practice their religion, but they knew it pretty well. Beside these high society Jewish nobles were their curious friends: **Romans** who ruled the land of Palestine, who dominated the people by force, and who were curious about this **popular preacher** in the rural area called Galilee: Jesus of Nazareth.

Well, as you can probably read into these verses Jesus was very direct in addressing all these members of society in Palestine. For his followers, he offered **new insights** and new ideas. Not only were his teachings **radical**, they **reversed** the typical order of things. Later, Jesus will say this same thing more literally: that the last will be first and the **first will be last** (*Matt. 20:16*). We hear the groundwork for that pronouncement in our scripture today: If you **hunger** today, you will feast at God’s **heavenly banquet**. If you are full and have surplus food now, enjoy it, because **you will be judged** on the choices of your living. If you are hated and despised now, you will be praised by God and placed **above those who persecute you** now. Jesus was going against the rules of the day. He was reversing the **order of life and society**. As we learn later in the gospel story, this was a really “**big thing**.” Jesus kept opposing these members of government and religion. Eventually, it resulted in his arrest and cruel execution.

Like those everyday people in Palestine so many years ago, these verses from Jesus continue challenging us. After all, most of us have followed the accepted concepts and **rules of society**. But, perhaps you have experienced some kind of “push back” against the system.

This started for me when I was young, maybe seven or eight years old. That was when I noticed that my fidgeting stopped during the sermon and the words from the pastor were starting to make sense. I didn’t always string them together or comprehend their full meaning, but I could tell that these **teachings differed** a great deal from what I saw around me and experienced: at school, on the streets, even **at home**.

One example of finding a deeper meaning came about pretty innocently. It was my conscious encounter with prejudice, and it remains very fresh in my memory today. In my town, like most throughout the South, there were separate toilets, restaurants, schools, and stores for African-Americans. In my grammar school years, most of the towns and all of the school systems were segregated: There was an intentional separation of whites and blacks. This caused some confusion for me, and I recall conflicting emotions concerning these unfair practices which affected so much of the South. Over time, the schools were desegregated, that is unified, into a single system. This came about through Federal law. It began to correct a totally unjust system of discrimination, but hearts and minds changed very slowly. And, sadly this transition is not over for us in the United States. For many years, any talk of “mixing the races” brought some opposition throughout the southern states. Making the **changes** required “pushing back” against popular sentiment in many places.

In the same way, our scripture lesson shows Jesus attempting to **shake up** the system and to correct some **oppressive** and hurtful practices that were commonplace at the time. Borrowing at **high rates** of interest, using **rigged scales** to overcharge customers, and **cheating** on taxes and **breaking promises** were the norm. Most of the people of Palestine were little more than slaves.

In this setting, Jesus laid out some new groundwork for **thinking and living** with plenty of practical ways to make significant changes. And, make no mistake: these were **not requests**. They were, and remain, **commands**. The verbs in the original Greek are **imperatives**, a verb type that we use when we say to a child, “Go to your room!”. We could easily place an **exclamation point** after each phrase like this in our scripture lesson. So, Jesus is not wasting time getting this message “out there.” He wants to lay it out **plainly** for everyone.

But, how many heard the words and felt something **change** within them that day? How many made excuses and continued **life as usual**, ignoring the differences in position in **society**, the unfairness of **hoarding** all the wealth, and the **discrimination** against all manner of people? Doesn’t this apply to you and me today when we politely excuse ourselves and divert an uncomfortable conversation? Or, do we listen and ask the **unwanted question**: “Why does it stay this way?” And, this goes along with the unspoken, but necessary question for ourselves: “Why have I **done so little** to change these unjust practices?”

As we will learn in the coming weeks, Jesus takes **no shortcuts**: He does not mess around. He prepared a **sermon** and gave it to everyone gathered that day. And, it hit with a wallop. Jesus was talking about something **really big**. His words, and the **images** they created, **reversed the order** of things: in society, in economics, in governing, and in **relationships** among human beings.

These Beatitudes in *Luke* are delivered in the “Sermon on the Plain.” There are similar messages in the “Sermon on the Mount” in *Matthew*, and between the two accounts, I prefer the more pastoral language found in *Matthew*. You may feel differently, of course. Regardless, **God’s Word** in Jesus Christ still speaks to us today, and it comes through in both of these accounts. The **poor** do need help: Help of all kinds. The rich often **take advantage** of others, and then **ignore** the poverty, hunger, and homeless individuals that surround them, both here and in many other affluent countries. We rarely treat others in the **fair and even** way we hope to do, and we rarely act toward others in a way that we would **like to be treated**. And, regrettably we rarely are merciful, even to those who **show us mercy**.

But, keep in mind that correcting these personal **deficiencies** will not pave our way into heaven. That is a common, but mistaken, attitude toward these Beatitudes: that keeping these as commandments will **lead directly** to streets of gold beyond the “pearly gates” of heaven. But, that is **not the intent** of Jesus. Instead, Jesus informs us that the **kingdom of heaven** is quite different from the context and situations that we human beings have created for ourselves: ruling over others; hoarding wealth; ignoring the sick, the dying, the lame; and, ignoring those without shelter or employment.

In addressing these issues, Jesus lays down a **revolutionary approach** to life and living: Jesus exhibits all of these good and proper things that we should do. He is the living expression of **God's love, grace, and mercy**. Those who follow Jesus, especially those who live as disciples, understand that their **strength is in weakness**, that possessions are fleeting and passing, and that material wealth can be a gift, but becomes **a burden** when it leads to excluding others.

So, if we know the full story of the Gospel, we know that Jesus **reversed the order** of things in a brief time of ministry, perhaps two and half or three years. And, Jesus continues to influence you and me through **God's Word**, and through the **grace** of God, a gift that **overflows** like the grain spilling out in our scripture lesson. Knowing this, where are you and I in this **upside-down** condition that Jesus brought to the world? How do you and I live into these commands **to love** as we would, and should, be loved? And, in doing this can we allow God to change us into true **disciples of Jesus Christ**?

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