

## **The Sermon on the Level**

### **Luke 6:20-49, the Sermon on the Level**

This sermon is one of four lengthy sermons that Jesus taught that is recorded in the Gospels' account of His life. It is easily the best known of His sermons and the most often taught sermon. It has always had a prominent place in Christian teachings, and provides a wealth of sermon material. The great theologian, Augustine, said it presents "a perfect standard of the Christian life". Dietrich Bonhoeffer said the "Sermon on the Mount presents the cost of discipleship, the ideal". John Donne wrote, "All the articles of our religion, all the body of divinity is in this one sermon." Personally, I like best what author Kent Hughes said, "It is the antidote to the pretense and sham that plagues Christianity." The Sermon on the Mount was Jesus' first recorded major sermon, and was clearly at the beginning of His ministry.

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The Sermon of the Beatitudes (1886-96) by James Tissot from the series The Life of Christ, Brooklyn Museum (Photo credit: Wikipedia)[/caption]

Since Jesus was ushering in the New Covenant of Grace, He had to first deal with Israel's previous system of institutional religion which taught that the people were saved by keeping the Mosaic Law. Since Jesus knew that none of them perfectly kept the Law, and that all fell short of God's standard, Jesus had to first eliminate their illusions about their own self righteousness. Therefore, in Jesus' first sermon He assaulted the self righteousness of the Jewish religious leaders by revealing the true attitudes and righteousness of those who will be in the kingdom. What will actually be the attitudes and actions of God's people in the Kingdom of Heaven? This question is answered by Jesus in this sermon in such a way that it should cause all honest disciples to realize that they fall woefully short, and thus need Jesus in their lives to provide the true righteousness of the Kingdom. After all, who among us can say that they are "pure in heart", that they were never "angry with their brother", never looked upon a member of the opposite sex with lust, never told a lie, loved their enemy, etc.? I heard one preacher commenting on Matt.5:29-30 say, "If we were really supposed to "tear out your eye" if it makes you sin, and "cut off

your hand” if it makes you stumble, then the church would be full of blind people without hands.” The sermon Jesus preached in Luke 6:20-49 is very similar to the Sermon on the Mount recorded in Matthew 5, but His Luke 6 sermon was given on a “level place”. It was given at a different location to a different audience. After all, what preacher doesn’t preach his best sermon as often as he has a new audience that needs to hear it?

### Beatitudes

The beatitudes is commonly the name given to the attitudes Jesus taught in Matt.5:3-11, and Luke 6:20-49. Somebody said this came from the idea to be of the attitude of poor in spirit, mourners, gentle, etc, but the term beatitude comes from the Latin adjective beatus which means happy or blissful. The teachings are given in eight blessings in Matt.5:3-11, and five blessings in Luke 6:20-23. Each one has a condition and a result which is derived from the Old Testament, but Jesus elevated them to a higher standard. Traditional Christianity has seen them as a new set of ideals peculiar to Christianity, and other religions have also bought into their concepts of love and humility instead of the world’s typical force and deception from personal ambition. Whatever anybody thinks of them, they have to admit that it is radical that in each of the beatitudes Jesus names a group of people normally thought to be downtrodden and unfortunate and then calls them “blessed”. In reality the word blessed is not a feeling of happiness like the ancient theologians who named them beatitudes thought. Jesus’ pronouncement of “blessed are” is an objective statement about what God thinks of them. God approves of them. I mean get real—how many people would be happy if they were poor, in mourning, hungry, in need of mercy, persecuted, etc? No, Jesus is presenting the objective reality that God is aware of our straits, approves of us, and will in the future somehow bless us.

### The Poor in Spirit

Most of us spend our life working to not be poor, but here we see that in some sense it is a good thing. Poor in spirit has nothing to do with money, self worth, shyness, and does not mean a showy external humility. It is the sincere knowledge and feeling of spiritual bankruptcy. The poor in spirit know that without God’s help, they have a desperate need that they cannot meet alone. Therefore, they approach God in humility seeking help from God. This is a difficult concept because the world we live in rejects the poor in spirit but embraces proud self sufficiency, strength, and aggression. This is an important issue for Christians because nobody can come to Christ without recognizing their great need for help and their own insufficiency. On the other hand, all who are proud, self sufficient, and believe in their own self righteousness are terminally lost. Salvation is received by faith alone, but poverty of spirit precedes it.

At this point someone may be wondering how we can be sure that Jesus desired to shatter the illusion of self righteousness, and if that was the problem of the religious leaders of His day. A good reference for this is the parable Jesus told in Luke 18:9-14. Jesus actually told that parable to certain ones “who trusted in themselves” as righteous before God. Then Jesus gave the contrast between the Pharisee and the known sinner in the temple praying. The Pharisee boasted in his good deeds and condemned the other people, but the tax-gatherer was praying , “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” Jesus went on to say that the sincere humble confessing sinner was justified by God, but the proud Pharisee who exalted himself was not.

### Those Who Mourn over Sin

Luke 6:21 progresses from poor in spirit to mourning, and as they mourn, God will comfort them. What this does not mean is that they are grim, withdrawn, or sad over their lot in life. Their mourning is over their poverty of spirit and their many moral failures. The best example of this is found in Charles Colson’s book. He had been Nixon’s “hatchet man”, but in the Watergate scandal found himself brought down to the bottom. No longer proud and self sufficient, he wrote that “I sat alone in my car dwelling on my own sin, not just the dirty politics, but the hatred and lying and evil so deep within me. I felt unclean, but I found myself driven into the arms of the living God.”

### The Gentle or the Meek

My image of Jesus standing with Pilate before the palace helps me understand why the meek shall inherit the earth. They were at opposite ends of a tragic paradox. Jesus was free of all sin, but Pilate was a prisoner, a slave to his pride and thus his sin. Jesus will inherit the Kingdom of God, but Pilate will only inherit death. Rome’s philosophy was blessed are the proud, aggressive, and intimidating—the takers. Jesus had been teaching that giving is receiving, dying to self is living, and serving is ruling. Now we know that Pilate is food for worms and Rome is just a pile of rocks for archaeologists to dig through, but Jesus is at the right hand of God in all glory.

What do you Hunger and Thirst for?

Have you noticed that all of us who are hungry for wealth, success, acclamation, power, or even food and drink; never have enough? Have a good meal, but the next day you are hungry and thirsty again. Jesus told the crowd in John 6:35 that “I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.” They were asking Jesus to provide for their material needs, but Jesus shifted the issue to the spiritual realm because that was their real need, and that’s why Jesus came—to meet their real need. If we allow Jesus to solve our spiritual crisis, we will never be spiritually hungry or thirsty again.

The Merciful and the Pure in Heart

Being merciful or compassionate should be the response of those who have received the mercy and compassion of God. When we show mercy to others it is evidence that we appreciate the mercy we have received from God. Matt.5:8, “Blessed are the pure in heart” is a grand thing to aspire to. Heart means more than just mind, it is also your inner feelings and emotions. It is what you desire to do as well as what you externally do. Of course human nature presents some serious problems here. Didn’t Jeremiah say that “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure” (Jer.17:9)? Jesus said in Mark 7:21, “out of men’s hearts come evil thoughts”. The promise that God gave concerning the New Covenant (Ezek.36:26) was “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you”. Only through the grace of God can hearts be changed, so to be pure in heart, God must give us a new heart.

The Peacemakers, the Persecuted, and the Insulted

In this world, nothing is certain but death, conflict, and war. There is only one solution to these realities—Jesus. We need Him to mediate peace between us and God, and then He will give us His Spirit to change our hearts so we can have peace with each other. There appears to be a paradox in Luke 6:22-23 that those who are persecuted and insulted will rejoice. Consider

that historically the church has always thrived under persecution. Read the letters to the churches in Rev.2-3. The only churches that have their act together are the poor and persecuted. The real danger is that without it, the church becomes just like the world it exists in.

Let me see if I can put these verses together—Those who recognize their spiritual poverty will mourn over their sin. God will bless them so that they will experience gentleness in dealing with others. Because of their need that they recognize, they seek after or hunger for God’s righteousness. As God blesses them, He purifies their hearts, and with new hearts they become peacemakers and rejoice in all things, even persecution and insults.

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