

### 34. The Sermon on the Plain

Luke 6:17-49

*Peter had recently died, in the persecution of Nero. The Apostolic Age was over. The churches needed something better than Mark as a source of doctrine. They also needed more teaching material than Mark gave them. All this Luke provided, rewriting Mark with new additions. One enigma in Mark was the rich young man. Did Jesus really mean him to give away all his wealth? Yes, said Luke, and here is how that works. And just after the place in Mark where Jesus has chosen the Twelve, and has healed many people, Luke inserts this sermon.*

And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said, Blessed ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed ye that hunger now: for ye shall be filled. Blessed ye that weep now, for ye shall laugh. Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you, and reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of Man's sake. Rejoice in that day, and leap [for joy], for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for in the same manner did their fathers unto the prophets. But woe unto you that are rich, for ye have received your consolation. Woe unto you, ye that are full now, for ye shall hunger. Woe, ye that laugh now, for ye shall mourn and weep. Woe, when all men shall speak well of you, for in the same manner did their fathers to the false prophets.

But I say unto you that hear: Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you. To him that smiteth thee on the cheek, offer also the other; and from him that taketh away thy cloak, withhold not thy coat also. Give to every one that asketh thee; and of him that taketh away thy goods, ask them not again. And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise. And if ye love them that love you, what thank have ye? For even sinners love those that love them. And if ye do good to them that do good to you, what thank have ye? For even sinners do the same. And if ye lend to them of whom ye hope to receive, what thank have ye? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive again as much. But love your enemies, and do [them] good, and lend, never despairing; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be sons of the Most High, for he is kind toward the unthankful and evil. Be ye merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

And judge not, and ye shall not be judged; and condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned; release, and ye shall be released; give, and it shall be given unto you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, shall they give into your bosom. For with what measure ye mete it shall be measured to you again.

And he spake also a parable unto them, Can the blind guide the blind? Shall they not both fall into a pit? The disciple is not above his teacher, but every one when he is perfected shall be as his teacher. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how canst thou say to thy brother, Brother, let me cast out the mote that is in thine eye, when thou thyself beholdest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, cast out first the beam out of thine own eye, and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote that is in thy brother's eye. For there is no good tree that bringeth forth corrupt fruit; nor again a corrupt tree that bringeth forth good fruit. For each tree is known by its own fruit. For of thorns men do not gather figs, nor of a bramble bush gather they grapes. The good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and the evil [man] out of the evil [treasure] bringeth forth that which is evil: for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh.

And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say? Every one that cometh unto me, and heareth my words, and doeth them, I will show you to whom he is like: he is like a man building a house, who digged and went deep, and laid a foundation upon the rock; and when a flood arose, the stream brake against that house, and could not shake it: because it had been well builded. But he that heareth, and doeth not, is like a man that built a house upon the earth without a foundation, against which the stream brake, and straightway it fell in; and the ruin of that house was great.

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*Reflections*

This is an extraordinarily compact piece of theology. The root idea is that all ethical events are *transactional*. You are not to profit from your contacts with others (an idea already present in Rabbinic tradition, where all exchanges must be zero-sum).<sup>1</sup> Instead, you must seek to be always on the losing end.. *Salvation comes with worldly divestiture, not with worldly possession.*

Paradoxically, it is a lack of assurance in this world that provides the best foundation for hope in the next world. You must welcome loss, and seek to lose even more, whether it is money or personal dignity.

This is a radical departure from mainline Jewish thought, in which wealth is a sign of God's favor (it is with wealth that poor Job is rewarded at the end), and in which poverty counts as a reprimand from on high.

It is also a highly counterintuitive proposition. It could stand spelling out. In practice, does this work economically? How shall we live from day to day? If we have standards of conduct, can't we apply them to others in our group? And isn't it very dangerous to say publicly that we even *belong* to this group? Look at what happened to Peter and the other guys who preached in Rome.

Luke answers just these questions, in a long and severe second sermon, which he places later in his Gospel. The two Sermons together are most of what Luke has to offer by way of supplement to Mark, including his development of Mark's own theory of poverty.<sup>2</sup>

But before we take up that second sermon, we may first pause to consider one line of the Sermon on the Plain, one which it is easy to miss amid the rest. This is what has come to be known as the Golden Rule.

<sup>1</sup>For lending among neighbors, see Mishnah Baba Mesia 5:9, "And so does Hillel say, A woman should not lend a loaf of bread to her friend unless she states its value in money. For the price of wheat may go up, and the two women will turn out to be involved in a usurious transaction." For this Mishnah doctrine of *even* transactions, Luke is substituting a doctrine of *uneven* transactions: those in which the individual will be a creditor *in the next world*. Something will then be owed to him, and eternal life is the only coin in which he can be paid.

<sup>2</sup>See for example Mk 10:19 (Chapter 4). The implied theory of divestiture had already been somewhat developed in the later layers of Mark; see Chapter 19.