

Lord Over the Impossible
A Preview of the Sermon on the Plain
Luke 6:20-49

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If my counseling practice has taught me nothing else, it has taught me very few people are truly interested in getting well. They do not like the emotional and even physical pain they feel, but if recovery means personal change, they resist. I know this sounds crazy, but statistically this is true, and other counselors and psychologists affirm my experience. What is truly unsettling is when this resistance to change describes a professing Christian.

In addition to this inherent resistance, there is also a prevailing theology within evangelicalism that presents what Dallas Willard describes as an almost insurmountable obstacle to spiritual formation and Christlikeness.¹ I would add that this theology actually serves as a co-conspirator with the flesh in opposing the work of the Spirit in the believer's life. Therefore, it simply does not register for most Christians that discipleship and change have anything to do with being a Christian.

So, there is this twin problem: inherent resistance to change, *and* a prevailing theology that reinforces this carnal resistance by teaching that discipleship and transformation have no connection to what it means to be saved.²

In the coming weeks, I will delve into what is called by many, our Lord's "Sermon on the Plain" as found in Luke 6:20-49. This sermon represents a pivotal shift away from Jesus working as a lone figure, to His formation of disciples to join Him in that mission, but not just in ministry, but also in displaying the Father's character to the world. Today, I want to provide a brief review of our journey with Luke up to this point, and then a preview of where we are going next.

Lord Over the Impossible

From the beginning of Luke's narrative, we discovered the God of Israel to be the Lord over the impossible. In chapter one, we met Elizabeth, an aged woman without a child. But God intervened, and she and her husband Zachariah were given a son, John, and through the normal human means. Then there was a young virgin named Mary who also became pregnant, but by the direct creative act of the Holy Spirit within her womb. Two impossible situations in which God acted, one by natural means, the other, by supernatural means.

We were reminded also that the faith of our father Abraham was founded upon believing for the impossible. For Abraham and Sarah, the impossible involved having a child in

¹ Dallas Willard, "Spiritual Formation as a Natural Part of Salvation," in *Life in the Spirit*, Jeffrey P. Greeman and George Kalantzis. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010). p.45.

² Ibid.

their advanced age. But God promised, and Abraham believed God, and became the father of many nations (Romans 4:16-22). What God promises He will perform, no matter how impossible it may seem to us.

So, what is the “impossible” for which you and I are called to believe? What is it that appears humanly impossible for you, and for me? The answer is this: genuine righteousness. I am not speaking of the surface righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, but a genuine righteousness that flows from the heart. This is the impossible thing for which we are called to believe. If you are honest, you realize such *actual* righteousness is impossible in your own strength and resources. Most Christians know the righteousness of Christ is their refuge, by *imputation*, but they know little or nothing of the actual righteousness of Christ *within their own character*. Some of the meanest people I know are professing Christians. And some of the most morally decadent people who come to my office are professing Christians.

So, for those Christian stuck in destructive behaviors, what is missing in their profession of faith? The answer: *they are not being taught how to be disciples of Christ, which includes transformation into His likeness*. And I hope this series will contribute to the remedy of this tragic state.

I have identified six sections of our Lord’s sermon in Luke 6:20-49.³ The first section (v. 20-26) has do with a set of blessings and woes; the second (v. 27-36) involves practical instruction in sharing in our heavenly Father’s character; the third (v.37-38) involves freeing people from our personal judgment and condemnation, and instead become givers; the fourth (v.39-42) is a parable regarding spiritual blindness, and interpersonal relationships; the fifth, (v.43-45) deals with the fruit of the human heart, both good and evil; and the sixth (v.46-49) concludes the sermon with a warning and a promise: a warning to those who hear and do not obey, and a promise of an unshakable foundation for living to those who do hear *and* obey.

The Blessings and the Woes (v.20-26).

It is important to remember, the social, economic, and religious structure of first-century Israel was steeped in evil. Still, the average first-century Jew identified with this theocratic structure and its authority over the details of daily life. It was the norm. The power structure of Jerusalem was based more in rabbinic tradition than in the word of God. It was therefore unjust, oppressive, and exploitive. You may remember, John addressed issues of social injustice and oppression as he preached (Luke 3:7-17). John understood the status quo to be evil, and warned the people of God’s judgment.

For instance, the scribes devoured widow’s houses, meaning they pilfered the estates of widows for their own gain (Luke 20:47). The high priest ran a corrupt family business using the temple as a profit center. The patriarchy was oppressive of women, and the common thought was that the rich were blessed of God, while the poor were cursed of God (sound familiar?) It

³ It is possible, of course, that others may divide this sermon differently. I lay no claims to infallibility. It is the content that is to be our focus, regardless of how one may outline it.

was quite a shock therefore to hear Jesus pronounce blessing upon the poor, saying the kingdom of God belonged to them!

The remaining blessings, or beatitudes, are subsets of what it meant to be poor. To be poor meant you lived with hunger, *while the rich filled their bellies*. To be poor meant you wept *while the rich laughed*. And to be poor meant you were hated, excluded, reviled, and your name cast out as evil for associating with “the Son of Man.” Despite the heretical teaching of many today, the disciples were not rich, they had left all to follow Jesus, and this meant they were forced to rely on God for provision and protection. The blessing Jesus pronounces upon the poor is the announcement that God is with them and His kingdom reign had begun. It is not, “for yours will be *one day*, be the kingdom of God,” Rather, the words, “yours is the kingdom of God,” means God is present *in the now*. The disciple may be poor in the world’s eyes; indeed, they may be considered suckers, losers, and simpletons. But they are blessed of God, and His reign means they will now be filled, they will laugh, and when they suffer for associating with the Son of Man, they are commanded to rejoice and “leap for joy” for they are on the right side of history. They stand with the prophets who also suffered rejection.

The woes fall upon those who are rich, those who are full now, those who laugh now, and they are to be pitied because they stand with the false prophets upon whom belongs the judgment of God, not the kingdom of God. Now, these “woes” are not the prophetic curses like Jesus will later pronounce upon those cities that rejected Him despite all the miracles (Luke 10:13-16); rather, these woes are expressions of pity for those laboring under the judgment of God. Think of it! These people are rich, full, and happy, and their teachings popular among the people. But Jesus declares an emphatic, and pitiful, “Woe to you!” One has to try to imagine the tone in our Lord’s voice. He may have sighed as He gazed upon them, pity filling His eyes, “Woe to you!”

Some may find it disturbing that Jesus pronounces “Woe!” upon what Americans consider blessed. Are we not told to respect and admire those who have achieved financial independence; those whose parties are well stocked with food, drink, and laughter, and those who enjoy popularity within religious circles? Look at our TV commercials. The good life is set forth all around us. The good life is what we are told to work for, not the kingdom of God. “Our best life now,” says our own false prophets.

So what are we to make of this? Shall we embrace poverty in order to enjoy God’s blessing? Maybe. It would be better to do that than to live in the delusion of self-made financial security and social popularity. Another option is to begin now to realize we are already poor. Money does not make us rich, and the absence of money does not make us poor. The question is not whether we should elevate poverty as a desirable state, but whether or not you are living under the reign of God. The question is whether or not you are aware of your utter reliance and trust in His ability to protect and provide for you, or are you laboring under the delusion of self-made security and social acceptance? There are no “self-made” men or women in the kingdom of God.

Neither are there any celebrities in the kingdom of God. If you are a people pleaser, you are on the wrong side of redemptive history. The false prophets were popular because they promised the people the protection and provision of God while they spent their lives in self-will

run riot. The false prophets were popular because they told people God was for them, regardless of whether or not those people were for God.

Children of a Merciful God (v.27-36).

The pronouncement of woes does not mean God hates these people. This is not a call to class warfare. The woes simply mean these people are to be pitied for in their self-reliance they have placed themselves in opposition to the ways of God, and thus under His judgment. There is a paradox here. The revelation of the judgment of God and the mercy of God. God does not judge evil because He hates people, but because evil cannot be allowed to go unchecked. And God is not obligated to do things our way, we are obligated to do things His way. In the next section, Jesus therefore commands His disciples to respond to their enemies the way God does—He loves them, He continues to do good to them, and He blesses them even though they curse Him, and spitefully use His name. And we are to respond to the world as God does. For if we react to the world the same way it reacts to us, we are no different than the world. But if we love our enemies, and so on, we show ourselves to be children of “the Most High,” and we display mercy because our Father is merciful. The paradox is found in that this contrast also makes evident the just nature of the judgment of God. There is something in loving your enemies, rather than hating them back, that makes crystal clear their dreadful state. Those who advocate non-violence understand that it exposes evil for what it is.

Give Up Judging and Condemning (v.37-38).

So, Christ’s disciples are those who judge not, and condemn not. Instead, they forgive, because they are forgiven. And Christ’s disciples are givers. There is something to that. And there is something about giving that causes people to want to give back. This is not saying we should give in order to get, nor should we give if doing so will enable irresponsible behavior, that would not be right giving. Remember, the goal is to show the character of the merciful Father to the world, not to be naïve or unwise, or a doormat.

Jesus is the Standard. Not You (v.39-42).

The parable regarding spiritual blindness has to do with making one’s self the standard by which people should measure spiritual health, rather than Jesus. Our Lord is saying if you want to be a people-fixer in order to avoid doing your own work, then you are spiritually blind, and a hypocrite. His words. We all know people who fail to work on their own issues, but regard themselves as experts on how to fix others. This is spiritual blindness. The disciple’s standard is Jesus, not you. And every disciple who is perfectly trained will be as his teacher, not you. “Work on yourself” is the call here, and look to Jesus alone to measure your progress, not to others. There is no legitimate thing as salvation by comparison.

Good and Evil Fruit (v.43-45).

In this section, Jesus provides a wonderfully simple theology of the human heart. For decades we have heard evangelists call people to “invite Jesus into their heart.” In this section, we learn if Jesus is truly present in one’s heart, the fruit of one’s life will bear evidence. If not, then it is best to reconsider one’s spiritual condition. Whatever characterizes our speech, actions, choices, and so on, springs from the heart. At the heart of the matter is this matter of the heart. And Jesus makes it clear: if your heart is right, your manner of life will be good; if your heart is evil, then your manner of life will reflect evil, no matter what one says about their being a follower of Christ.

An Unshakable Foundation for Living (v.46-49).

Since the Reformation, most Protestants have developed an allergy to spiritual disciplines. Even the very phrase, “spiritual disciplines” send some evangelicals running from what they think are evil “works-righteousness” teachers. The leading symptom of this allergy is nominal Christianity. It seems many evangelicals think they can confess “Lord, Lord” and then not do anything about it. But the mere profession, “Jesus is Lord,” apart from doing anything about it, makes those words as empty and superstitious as any pagan chant. In this final section, Jesus makes it abundantly clear, His disciples are those who not only hear His teachings, but put them into *action* as well. They are hearers and doers. It is not about faith versus works, it is about possessing a faith that produces works (James 2:18-26). And those who possess such faith Jesus compares to those who dig deep and lay a solid foundation against the coming storm. These disciples possess an unshakable foundation for living.

Some think Jesus’ reference to the flood refers to the final judgment, and that could very well be our Lord’s point. But we know that life carries storms as well, and those who simply talk about Jesus as Lord, and then live as though they themselves are the supreme authority, are often crushed by the storm, ruined beyond repair. The great deception of our time is that one can confess Christ with one’s mouth, but deny Him in one’s works, and yet be assured of God’s approval. An honest and close reading of this Sermon on the Plain leads one to a very different conclusion; a conclusion, if heeded, might very well spare one from utter misery in this life, and in the next.

Summary

The prophet Isaiah decried the status quo among the ancient people of God, saying, “Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil, who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! (Isaiah 5:20). Our Lord’s Sermon on the Plain challenges the religious mindset of our day just as it did the mindset of those who first heard it. Theologians often refer to Jesus’ preaching here as “The Great Reversal.” By this they mean Jesus turned the religious thinking and social structure of His day, not upside down, but upside right. Jesus viewed things from God’s perspective and preached and lived accordingly. In the coming weeks, you should be prepared to have your thinking challenged. And may I suggest

we all pray for mercy? May I suggest we all become willing to set aside our cherished, but faulty notions about wealth, poverty, dealing with our enemies, and how we relate to each other within the church? And, may I suggest we all become ready to reject a prevailing theology that leaves the heart unchanged, and one's actions and words laced with evil? May God grant us the grace to both hear and obey the words of our Lord. **AMEN.**

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