

OPENER:

There is a popular religious meme going around on the internet and on social media. This image depicts a statue of a despondent Jesus, with his hand covering his head, face-palming himself, in despair. The caption reads:

“I gave them the Beatitudes, and all they do is quote Leviticus.”

A lot is going on there, it's on the internet so there is going to be a mixture of humor, edginess, and misinformation. But I think that the meme's primary point is that Jesus's “Blessed are the _____” statements, the Beatitudes, are a more positive and loving, alternative to the rules and strictures of the Old Testament.

SYNOPTIC:

Our Gospel reading today, however, which features Luke's version of the Beatitudes, does not seem entirely positive or easy. In fact, Jesus' words come to us with an edge and difficulty that we are unaccustomed to.

These Beatitudes are a part of Luke's Sermon on the Plain, not to be confused with the more famous version of the Beatitudes, which are in Matthew and delivered as a part of the Sermon on the Mount. Those who study this sort of thing disagree on whether they were two sermons delivered at different times in different locations, or the same sermon remembered and written down in two different ways.

Regardless, Luke's is a shortened version, 30% shorter than Matthew's sermon. Audiences must have been happy... a shorter sermon! But what's remains is, again, tough to hear.

And Luke is supposed to be the nice one, the kind physician, the one with the Good Samaritan and Prodigal Son, the gospel where women are generally treated more positively.

But today, in Luke, we hear the more difficult version of the Beatitudes, with a side order of woes. It almost makes you wish for some Leviticus.

To compare the two Beatitudes:

In Matthew, Jesus says “Blessed are the poor in spirit.”

While in Luke, Jesus says “Blessed are you the poor.” (period.)

The message in Luke is less abstract, more pointed, than Matthew’s.

From where I am sitting, the blessings and the woes make me a tad uncomfortable.

SETTING:

Before talking about the content, let’s take another look at the setting.

Luke, the gifted story teller, considering how difficult this message will be, knows how to set the scene.

So while Matthew records his Beatitudes up on top of a mountain where Jesus goes up and preaches, standing, to his disciples, in the tradition of the lawgiver.

Luke, on the other hand, has Jesus come down from the mountain, where he finds a good plain. Jesus sits on the level space, speaks to them as teacher, on the level.

Jesus looks directly at them because this is going to be a difficult message to relay.¹

Luke has hinted at this style before. Remember Mary’s *Magnificat*, that’s another beautiful composition in Luke. It sounds like a lullaby, but like these Beatitudes, it flips everything upside down. The two of these, the Beatitudes and the *Magnificat*, related by author and style and content, appear sweet, because they might be too hard to swallow otherwise. But then they turn everything upside down.²

MORE CONTEXT:

So Jesus’ audience, both 2000 years ago and us today, need to be on solid, level ground, to hear Jesus’ words.

Who was the audience at the Sermon on the Plain?

Luke takes some time to identify it.

There are his 12 core apostles, and then a larger group of disciples who are unnamed around that core group, and then an even larger crowd, some from that area some from Jerusalem, and then those from the coast of Tyre and Sidon.

The latter would have meant to Gentiles. Luke is making pains to say that everyone is there: insiders-outsiders, Jews and Gentiles. All aspects of humanity—the

¹ Johnson, Luke Timothy. 2006. *The Gospel of Luke*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press. 106.

² Willimon, “Damn Preacher,” *Christian Century* (February 10, 2004) 18.

religious elite, and those in need of healing, along with random vagabonds; ‘passers by’ whom history will forget and then some giants of the church. All are there.

CONTENT:

Jesus delivers the “Blessings” and the “Woes” to that audience. Jesus says some of “you” (plural) are poor and some of “you” (plural) are rich. And he says that this earthly economic situation, that human reality does not correspond with what the Kingdom of God looks like.

I don’t think Jesus is trying to romanticize poverty, or declare an “IN” group that “gets it” but rather: Blessed are “you” (plural), woe to “you” (plural), and it’s a bit of a jumbled mess. And it’s a jumbled determination not just between groups, but within them and indeed within our very beings.

The message that he delivers to them, the Revelation in this Epiphany Season that Jesus provides also to us, is “you are not that great.”

Luke records Jesus with the courage to say that face-to-face with his audience. The light of the star reveals our woes, our inadequacies, our sinfulness.

And that’s okay. Because it’s not our efforts or our strivings or our bank accounts that determine who we are.

Jesus possesses this ability to make this proclamation, of course, because he can speak to the divine reality of those Beatitudes. He knows the ultimate Truth, the Authorship of those words, what they promise and what they mean.

Jesus is talking about the reality of God’s grace, and so rather than offering up a threat or a command, such that if we could simply conform to a higher standard, then we know that we have made it. Jesus instead states that things are as they are. It will get better, but not because we can simply flip the switch, but that because God already has.

ESCHATOLOGY:

The Beatitudes tempt us, in a very seductive way, to jump in to do the sorting out between the good and bad. But we are reminded that we are not the ones who get to make the call. God says in our Jeremiah reading, “Who can understand it? I alone test the mind and search the heart.”³ God alone gets to judge, because God alone knows our hearts.

We want to read the Beatitudes as imperatives, as a way of providing a shock to our system.

In other words, we want to heed another famous internet meme, or is it a George Carlin quote, or a bumper-sticker “Look busy, Jesus is coming.”

We want the Beatitudes to be a self-help plan to get us across this finish line: “I should do that or this, I should give more, I should be a better person, I should do _____.” And that’s true, maybe we should. There are genuine problems with income inequality in our community, the nation and the world.

But I think Jesus is using the indicative mood and not the imperative, “Blessed are the poor” (period.) Woe to the rich (period). Because he is describing what God’s kingdom is like. Jesus preaches in the present tense, face to face, declaring what is true. It’s not a challenge to strive harder, but a proclamation of what the Kingdom of God looks like.

CONCLUSION:

We should not read this and try to go out and make yourself better, but rather read it and give ourselves up to God, and to allow God to change through the power of the Resurrection.

Jesus says you can’t do it alone, you can’t do it by yourself. We are not good enough. “We need a heart transplant, not a tune-up. And that’s okay, because God is the divine cardiologist.”⁴

³ Jeremiah 17.9-10

⁴ “Filled with Cholesterol.... And Sin.” *Same Old Song* Podcast (Episode Epiphany 6) <https://www.mbird.com/2018/11/same-old-song-sings-again/> (February 11, 2019)

AMEN