

He came down with them and stood on a level place with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. ¹⁸They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases, and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹And everyone in the crowd was trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

²⁰Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. ²¹"Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. ²²Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven, for that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

²⁴"But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. ²⁵Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. ²⁶Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets."

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

I want to start with an observation. We have four gospels that tell the story of Jesus on earth. They are ... Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Great. Many of you have heard that the first three, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are fairly similar in their timeline and story-telling and the three of them are called the synoptic gospels. Scholars believe that they used similar sources, similar witnesses, and some argue that Mark was written first and that Matthew and Luke used Mark and another document as templates and adapted them to fit their audiences.

Now, John is unique. John took poetic license with his gospel, and it reads very differently than the other three.

And so, if you're studying the Bible, it's interesting to see where there are similarities and differences in texts. Not that one is better than the other. We're not advocating for one gospel more than another. We're not expecting one gospel to conform to look like another. In fact, the differences usually have something to teach us, and we can all have our favorite gospel without ignoring the others.

Many churches around the world use a three-year cycle of scripture readings called the lectionary. Those years are rooted around Matthew, Mark, and Luke – years A, B, and C. We are in year C, Luke's year, so the majority of scripture texts you'll hear from the gospels will be from Luke. Next year, we'll hear a lot from Matthew (going back to year A), but don't feel bad for John. He gets sprinkled into all three years like how you season your dinner. A little spice and flavor.

Today's text is familiar to many of us, but we normally refer to it not as the sermon on the plain but the sermon on the mount. How many of you have heard of the sermon on the mount? Now be honest, did you even know that there was a sermon on the plain? I understand. I get it. One version usually wins out in our cultural memories.

But what I like to do is to compare and contrast the stories that are similar but not exactly the same, because those differences have something to teach us.

I encourage you today to get your pew bibles out, or your Bible app on your phone, or both. Find Luke 6, our text, and also find Matthew 5.

The first thing we find is that the geography is different. In Matthew, Jesus sees the crowds and goes up a mountain so that his voice will carry and people can see him. It's physically helpful for him to be there. Not unlike how I get to stand two full steps higher than all of you. You gotta be able to see me, right? When I sit down on the steps for children's time, I understand that not all of you have a good line of sight anymore so being higher is helpful. And even without a microphone, being higher allows my voice to carry farther. That's why the choir is elevated even higher than I am!

And it's also spiritually meaningful for him to be on a mountainside. There's great symbolism with mountains. It harkens back to Moses receiving the word of God on Mount Sinai. Elijah encountered God on a mountain. Mountains physically symbolize a closer connection to heaven itself. It's a spiritual place where one can hear God's word more clearly. Jesus was delivering a message from God just like other leaders of the past.

You see, the writer of Matthew is a Jewish man, writing to the Jewish people. He's using Jewish imagery and Jewish culture to present Jesus as the Messiah, the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. He is speaking to the insiders who have spiritual pride and deeply rooted history and, even though they're being occupied by the Romans, they have ethnic pride and power.

On the other hand, Luke is known as a Gentile, writing to other Gentiles. People who are on the outside, looking in. People who are on the margins of society, powerless, and often poor.

Luke has Jesus preaching on a plain. A flat space. More akin to how it would feel if I came down from the pulpit and walked among you – more intimate, more personal.

Luke uses the Greek word *pedinos* to describe where Jesus stood. *Pedinos* means flat land, but it's also means a humble place where there is hunger, grief, disgrace, idolatry, danger, and poverty. When the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek, *pedinos* was

used ten times and it always referred to a place of sadness, shame, trials, and powerlessness.

Now, let's look at the content of the sermons. Matthew's sermon famously says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." Matthew also speaks of the persecution that these people will endure and promises future reward. These are lovely sentiments. Absolutely worthy of our study and adoption.

Luke uses almost the same language, but tell me if you can spot the differences. Luke says, "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 when people hate you and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man."

Do you have it? Do you hear the difference? "Blessed are the poor in spirit" v. "Blessed are you who are poor."

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" v. "Blessed are you who are hungry now."

In Matthew, there is blessing for those who have spiritual needs. In Luke, there is blessing for those who have physical needs - the actual poor, the actual hungry, and thirsty.

In one version, Jesus is an honored, tradition-upholding, Son of God-leaning, spiritual guru in a place of authority. In another, he's a very human, very compassionate, Son of Man-leaning, personal human being. One audience is the in-crowd. One audience is the outsiders.

Which one is right? Yes. Both. Which one you are drawn to, or which one makes you uncomfortable, reveals a lot about yourself, though.

Dr. Ronald Allen, a seminary professor, writes, “Many Eurocentric congregations (that means white churches) in the long-established denominations (like ours) are in a peculiar relationship to this passage. For many are aware that today’s world is a fractured “level place” in the Lucan sense described above. But few such congregations are deeply hungry for (much less weeping for) the level of social transformation implied in the [sermon when Jesus speaks about how things will be flipped upside down in the kingdom of God]. Only a few contemporary Christians and congregations are hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed because of their witness. Indeed, my impression is that most congregations today in the long-standing denominations are in situations more like [the people Luke referred to who] had wealth, were full, and laughing, and were in good social standing according to the standards of the old age.”

Yikes. If that academic language didn’t make sense to you, he’s basically saying, White American churches, in general, don’t like Luke’s Sermon on the Plain as much as they like Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount because white American churches are more comfortable talking about spiritual hunger than physical hunger. More comfortable with keeping peace if it means keeping the status quo. Modern churches are not as comfortable talking about actual poverty or the actual poor, and don’t necessarily want the social order to be turned upside-down because that would not be to their benefit.

This study of the two versions of the sermon Jesus preaches is a “take a look in the mirror moment, but I don’t want you to think that one is wrong and one is right. Like the Sneetches, there are people who like Matthew’s version and people who like Luke’s version. No one is wrong, and no one can say that they are exclusively right. At Dunn’s Corners, we work with the Warm Shelter and JonnyCakes and we have grief groups and we have Bible studies and book studies and we worship. We try to take care of each other holistically. Body, mind, and spirit. No one element of our lives is more important than another. What hypocrites we would be if we said, “church is only about worship and not about serving our community,” or vice versa. I’m proud of how we strive to care for people in a variety of ways.

Finally, I don't know exactly what Jesus said to the disciples that day. Or geographically where he was standing. Or what he meant. What words we have are what was written down decades after Jesus left by different authors, to different audiences, for different reasons. The sermons are similar, but different enough to make us think. How do we hear these words? Are we the privileged? Are we the insiders? Are we wealthy and powerful and well-fed? If so, can we open our eyes and see the poor and hungry and hear Jesus calling them the blessed ones?

Or are we the outsiders, the vulnerable and broken? If we are, can we see our siblings in Christ striving for spiritual growth and honor their humility in that regard and hear Jesus bless them for their spiritual discipline? There are lessons here for all of us. So the final thought from me is simply that we should pray that God write the words that we are meant to hear on our hearts, and realize that God cares about the whole human experience – spiritual and physical. Those who are physically hungry are blessed. Those who are spiritually hungry are blessed. Jesus cares about all of us. All of us. May we all find what we need in Jesus and care for those who are in need both physically and spiritually. Amen.