

## We Have a Kind and Generous God. And So...?

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Matthew's Sermon on the Mount may be the most sublime and challenging set of moral and spiritual teaching ever spoken. Luke's version, the Sermon on the Plain, has condensed it into about one/fourth the length. Distilled nectar.

The keynote line is Luke 6:35: "For God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked." Other translations read: "to the ungrateful and the selfish." In any case, that's most of us some of the time, right? *We have a God who is generous and kind.* That's the basis of our life as children of God. How then shall we live? Luke's Sermon on the Plain shows us.

### I

We start with Luke's Beatitudes- which are starker and more challenging than in Matthew. For example in the first beatitude in Luke Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are poor," not as Matthew has it, "Poor-in-spirit." And after the four Beatitudes in Luke there are four "Woes," or Warnings.

If we were to read Mary's Magnificat, Mary's Song side by side with the Beatitudes and Woes in Luke you see that both speak to God's up-side-downing of the world as it is. You can almost imagine Mary singing it to young Jesus, and her song helping form his heart and mind.

The first Beatitude: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God." Again, not the "poor-in-spirit" as in Matthew, but "you poor." Luke wanted us not to spiritualize the beatitude and forget that Jesus was coming to the *poor* poor, not just the spiritually poor.

Second Beatitude: "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled." Yes, fed. Feeding the hungry is part of the mission of the kingdom of God.

Third Beatitude: "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." The Spanish philosopher Miguel Unamuno spoke of what he called "the Common Weeping" we all share as human beings, but there is also the "Common Rejoicing" to come when bad news is turned to good news.

Fourth Beatitude: "Blessed, happy are you when people exclude you and revile you and cast out your name as evil on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day, leap for joy for heaven's reward is on the way." David Brooks calls this rejoicing "moral joy", the joy we feel when we live up to our highest values. Jesus' words also remind us that when we live as the prophets of old, opposing the

injustices of the day, we will be opposed, derided, cursed. Jesus didn't say "Blessed are the Nice, the Comfortable, the Content."

Then the four Woes, or Warnings, a familiar form of prophetic speech. New Testament scholar Charles Talbert translates the word "Woe" as "O, the tragedy of". So here are the four woes:

"O, the tragedy of you who are rich. You have (already) received your consolation."

"O, the tragedy of you who are full, stuffed, now, for you will be hungry."

"O, the tragedy of you who laugh it up now, for you will mourn and weep."

"O, the tragedy when everyone speaks well of you, for that's what the ancestors did to the false prophets." The false prophets spoke what everyone wanted to hear and what the king wanted them to say. True prophets spoke the truth and what *God* wanted them to say. You can guess which were more popular.

## II

Now to the body of Jesus' sermon, and to the major theme: God is gracious and kind; how then shall we live?

Jesus starts at the hardest part:

Love you enemies

Do good to those who curse you

Pray for those who kick you around.

“Love your enemies!” If churches put that in their church covenants, who would join?

What does this look like? First, *non-retaliation*. “If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also.” Don’t get hung up on the literal-ness of the example. It means, Don’t strike back or pay back. Who is our enemy? Karl Barth said it well: Anyone who tempts you to return evil for evil. Who has tempted you to do this in your life? Who is tempting you now?

Those who led the Civil Rights movement took these verses seriously. They adopted non-violence as their way as they resisted the injustice and evil of their day. When people harmed them, they took it and did not strike back, and suffered bodily harm. Ghandhi following the precepts of Jesus had led a non-violent revolution in India which took down an empire. Now the power of non-violent resistance was winning the day in America. And it all came from a few words in a little sermon preached by a poor itinerant preacher in an occupied country in the corner of the Roman Empire.

But love of one's enemy is more than non-retaliation; it is also *active good will*. "Do good to them, bless them, pray for them." They are all, we are all, children of God. Martin Luther King was asked once how he could love those who were planning and doing him harm. He said it was because he believed that "There is something of the best in the worst of us and something of the worst in the best of us." King said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that; hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that."

So, did anyone pop into your mind as I've been speaking? Maybe your stomach began to twist. You don't have to *like* them. Liking may come later. Pray for them. If there's something to praise about them, praise them. Do some secret nice thing for them. I know a doctor who decided he would pray for people he didn't like every time he washed his hands during his work day—which was, as a doctor, *many* times. He told me it made his life better; it made him better.

And why do we live like this? Love like this? Because that's who *God* is. For God is kind to the ungrateful and selfish, to the ungrateful and wicked. *Our God is generous and kind*, and to be sons and daughters of God means to be generous and kind.

Jesus sums it up with the "golden rule": "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Or as farmer, writer Wendell Berry put it: "Do unto

those downstream as you would have those upstream do to you.” Most all religions have their version of the golden rule.

### III

Then there’s this strange attention to lending money. To people, whether they can repay or not. Jesus is saying that *money too* is part of the currency of the kingdom of God, part of the kindness and generosity of God.

A few years back a Nobel Peace Prize was given to a *bank*, of all things! Its story is a parable of the kingdom of God.

In 1974 a young economics professor was teaching in a university in Bangladesh. He learned about a woman who was borrowing money from a money-lender, an amount less than one U.S. dollar. The interest on the loan was that the money-lender would have exclusive rights to buy all that she produced at a price that the money-lender decided. The professor realized that this was equal to slave labor. So he made a list of all the victims in the village who had borrowed from this money-lender—forty-two in all—and paid all that was owed from his own pocket, in total twenty-seven U.S. dollars. It was a small gesture. But he saw the immense happiness of the people who were being set free from economic enslavement.

So he sought additional ways to come to the aid of his neighbors. He turned to the commercial banks to help him help the poor but was told that “the poor were not credit-worthy”. So the young economics professor offered to become the guarantor for the loans to the poor. “I was stunned by the result”, he said. “The poor paid back their loans on time, every time.”

Frustrated when the banks would not extend the program, he decided to create a separate bank for the poor, and in 1983 he finally succeeded in doing that. Mohammed Yunus was his name, and he named the new bank, Grameen Bank, or Village Bank. In his Nobel Peace Lecture in 2006, Mohammed Yunus reported that “today Grameen Bank gives loans to nearly 7 million poor people, 97% of whom are women, in 73,000 villages in Bangladesh.” Since he introduced them in 1984, housing loans have been used to construct 640,000 homes. The legal ownership of these houses belongs to the women themselves. The bank has given out loans totaling about 6 billion in U.S. dollars. The repayment rate is 99%... and 58% of his borrowers have crossed the poverty line.

“The kingdom of God is like”, Jesus would say, then begin his parable. Like a mustard seed which grew and grew and grew. Like a king who threw a party and invited everybody. Like a young economics professor who went out and saw the plight of his people, like Grameen Bank.

So, let me draw you a picture of kingdom of God economics. Those who are full pour from their fullness—whatever that fullness is—into the emptiness of others. And those who are empty receive from the fullness of others. The marvelous thing is that we are all full in some ways and empty in others. And when we are in the flow of the kingdom we are giving and receiving all of the same time. That's the way of it, the joy of it.

Our fullness may be in talent, time, money, expertise, common-sense smarts, compassion, love. And our emptiness may be any number of things. But in the Kingdom of God it is continuous, joyful giving and receiving. For God is generous and kind. And so are we, the children of God.

### Conclusion

Luke summarized this part of the sermon with these words: “Be merciful as your Father [that is heavenly Father] is merciful. “Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate.” Do you remember Matthew’s version of these words? “Therefore you must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Whoah! Who can be perfect? Perfectionism strangles our lives, kills the spirit. But the Greek word for perfect here means whole or complete, becoming who God made us to be. That’s better isn’t it? But I want to focus on Luke’s version: Be



merciful as your Father is merciful. Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate.

The Old Testament command behind them both is the central command: “ Be holy as God is holy.” But Jesus changed the words—on purpose! Be compassionate as God is compassionate. You will see this theme all the way through Luke.

This is what I think Jesus is saying. You can write it on your hearts:

*It is in compassion that we come closest to the Holiness of God.*