



## Unearthing the Overlooked Gems of Luke's Sermon on the Plain

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### GOSPEL FARE

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*The Sermon on the Plain emphasizes Jesus' call to mercy and compassion. Explore how this sermon complements the Sermon on the Mount's lessons.*

Though I have no hard evidence to prove this, I think it is entirely likely that the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) is among the most well-known of all Christian scripture. Indeed, as the [Come, Follow Me](#) guide notes, [President Joseph Fielding Smith](#) called it “the greatest [sermon] that was ever preached, so far as we know.” From its carefully constructed and poetically profound beatitudes to the simple and yet ever-inspiring Lord's Prayer, from its use of imagery (birds, beams, motes, lilies), to its direct and loving call to live in a holier way—the Sermon on the Mount is a *tour du force*. Though this sermon has provided fodder for Christian reflection and exegesis for nearly 2,000 years, it still feels as fresh and applicable as ever. It is probably impossible to

measure the impact the 111 verses that comprise the Sermon on the Mount have had on humankind generally and Christians specifically.

Having said all that, sometimes it *also* feels like the Sermon on the Mount looms so large in Christian consciousness that we fail to appreciate the remarkable nature of the Gospel of Luke's Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6). Too often, the Sermon on the Plain is viewed as "Luke's version" of the Sermon on the Mount. It is true that the Sermon on the Plain has some similarities in its overall structure and language. But it is also true that as part of the Gospel of Luke—which has a view of Jesus and His mission that is different than the one Matthew presents (more on that in a moment)—the Sermon on the Plain drives toward a different theological point than the Sermon in Matthew's Gospel. That is to say, the Sermon on the Plain offers distinct and valuable lessons for us *in its own right*, separate and apart from (and in addition to) anything we might learn from the Sermon on the Mount. So, for this brief essay, I want to focus on this "other Sermon." Even though it is much shorter (only about one-third the length of the Sermon on the Mount), a detailed analysis of the *entire* Sermon is still beyond the scope of this brief essay. So, instead, I will highlight only a few items that have jumped out at me as I reconsidered this section of scripture.

Jesus is focused on people who are financially poor.

To begin with, we must remember (as I noted in [January](#)) "each of the gospels ... tells a different story of Jesus from a different perspective and with a different point of emphasis ... they each offer unique and irreplaceable insight." In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus's mission is framed early on in ways that are unique to Luke's gospels (in fact, nearly half the material in Luke is not found in other Gospels). For instance, Jesus's genealogy is traced back to Adam (not stopping with Abraham as happens in Matthew), suggesting a connection to all of humanity, not just the religious or political elite. As another example, in Luke, angels appear to common folk like shepherds and, most significantly, to women (in Matthew, angels only appear to men). When considered alongside the reality that Simeon and Anna (otherwise unknown individuals of no known social status) are the ones who validate Jesus's divine mission when He is eight days old (not wise men from the east, as in Matthew), it suggests Jesus's connection to those who are otherwise outside the circles of power. Finally, in Luke, Jesus Himself is recorded as [publicly reading](#) sections from Isaiah 61 in His hometown synagogue; the verses He reads suggest that the focus of His ministry is the poor, the brokenhearted,

the captive, the blind, and the bound. Taken collectively, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus is most closely connected with those who might seem to be on the margins of society but who are ready to receive the salvation that Jesus offers "today" (2:11, 4:21, 19:9, 23:43). All of this matters because it informs how Luke intended us to read the Sermon on the Plain.

First, it is remarkable that the sermon in Luke is given a flat piece of earth. In fact, Luke records that Jesus "came down with them, and stood in the plain" (6:17). Prior to this, Jesus had spent all night "out into a mountain to pray" (6:12). Yet, for the sermon, "He came down." For Luke, this is a detail that matters. In this action, Jesus physically enacts His spiritual mission: He goes down to the people and stands on the same level as they stand. He is teaching them, but He is *with* them, too (not above them). What's more, Jesus's audience consists of a wide variety of people. Luke records that individuals came from Judea and Jerusalem (likely Jewish individuals, as might be expected) but *also* from [Tyre and Sidon](#)—areas that were decidedly non-Jewish. Again, for Luke, this detail matters: over and over again in Luke, Jesus's message is heard by and validated by those who are considered to be outside the centers of religious and political power.

Now onto the sermon itself. In ways that are quite touching, the Sermon on the Plain reflects Jesus's care for and mission to the poor and outcast. And I don't mean the "poor in spirit" or those that "hunger and thirst after righteousness" (as is the case in the Sermon on the Mount). In the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus is focused on people who are *financially* poor and who are *physically* hungry. Says Jesus: "Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are ye that hunger now: for ye shall be filled" (6:20-21). In Luke, Jesus's message is one of deliverance today from the real-life challenges faced by those who are most vulnerable in society. The Sermon on the Plain seems to suggest that addressing the physical needs of these individuals is among the primary concerns of Jesus and opens up the idea that there is no hard distinction between working today to meet the basic needs of those around and spiritual salvation (a notion which is reinforced by the Doctrine and Covenants, which collapses the spiritual the physical; [D&C 29:34; 131:7-8](#)). And Jesus is, in equal parts, critical of those who are currently physically secure but (apparently) take no steps to help the poor and needy. Says Jesus, "woe unto you that are rich! for ye have received your consolation. Woe unto you that are full! for ye shall hunger" (6:24-25). Indeed, the Gospel of Luke is a gospel of reversals: the poor and hungry get Jesus's focus and promised blessings, whereas the rich and full (who perhaps think they are rich and full because of God's blessings) will receive no additional recompense and end up hungry. And again, there is no indication that Jesus

is suggesting this will take place after death, or in some future time, or in a spiritual way that may not be recognized by others. In the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus is suggesting that He came to make these things happen *today*.

The Sermon on the Plain also, in a way that is similarly profound, insists on good, ethical behavior—not in connection to some prior teaching (the formulation in the Sermon on the Mount is usually something along the lines of “In the past it was taught ... and I say ...”), but simply as a matter of course. It is just the way we are supposed to live: “Love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again” (6:35). That’s it. Again, it is worth observing—in connection with the point above—that this is practical behavior for the here-and-now. This is how we are supposed to act *today*, even toward those who hate us, curse us, and lend but do not return the item. But, you might ask, how is all of this *that* different from the Sermon on the Mount? That answer comes in the way these teachings are summarized. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus summarizes His discourse on behavior with the charge, “be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48), a requirement that [cannot be achieved in this lifetime](#). But perfection is, simply put, *not the primary concern* in the Sermon on the Plain. Instead, in the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus summarizes His ethical discourse in a way that is surprising and unexpected: “Be ye therefore *merciful*.” (6:36, emphasis added). In Luke’s Gospel, mercy trumps everything else and is to be the guiding principle of our lives. We are to extend mercy to others. And mercy can happen now, every day, toward everyone; the ability to extend mercy is never “pending.” But that’s not all; Jesus teaches that we are to “be ye therefore merciful” because “your Father also is *merciful*” (6:36, emphasis added). In Greek, the root word underneath “merciful” is *oiktirmón*, which suggests [tenderness and the visceral compassion God has for those in difficult situations](#). This is how we are to be because this is how God is. In the Sermon on the Plain, first and foremost, God is a God of mercy. In fact, mercy (not perfection, as in the Sermon on the Mount) is *the* defining characteristic of God.

Mercy trumps everything else.

There are other fascinating insights to be gained from the Sermon on the Plain because it is not just “Luke’s version” of the Sermon on the Mount. It is its own discourse with its own message and its own lessons. And to be especially clear, seeing a unique and different message in Sermon on the Plain from that which we see in the Sermon on the Mount does not detract from either. Again, as I noted in [January](#), “I believe there is

strength to be found in embracing the many different ways Jesus is presented in the New Testament. ... [the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain] each offer unique and irreplaceable insight. Each teaches us something unique and remarkable about Jesus, and they can stand side-by-side." I hope that we will all take the time to uncover these messages from both sermons for ourselves.

## About the author

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