

## WHAT IS REAL?

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FEBRUARY 23, 2025

Blessings and Woes Luke 6:17-26

<sup>17</sup> He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, <sup>18</sup> who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, <sup>19</sup> and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all. <sup>20</sup> Looking at his disciples, he said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. <sup>21</sup> Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. <sup>22</sup> Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. <sup>23</sup> "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the Prophets. <sup>24</sup> "But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. <sup>25</sup> Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now for you will mourn and weep. <sup>26</sup> Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

Christians live as we try to live, not simply because Christ has commanded us to live in a certain way, or we're really good at knowing and following rules, but rather we live in a certain way because of the way we now know the world to be.

A major reason why we gather here for worship on a weekly basis is to be reminded of what's what, to get a vision, to receive a picture of reality now that God in Jesus Christ has reached out to us.

The gentleman works all day, every weekday putting numbers in spreadsheets for company he was working for. He is good at it. Sitting before his computer screen, tapping at the keys on the keyboard, every day.

*"In many ways, I despise my job," he says. "Sometimes the sameness, the relentless routine really gets to me. It's the same old stuff, day after day."*

All of this was by way of explaining his hobby. On Saturdays and Sundays, he makes wooden toys for children, beautifully crafted, strong, and sturdy, old-fashioned pull toys, and rocking horses. These he gives to the town's center for the underprivileged. Poor families are presented with these wonderful, hand-crafted toys for their children, all because of his generosity and skill.

*"Actually, I do it for myself," he explains. "I'm glad that my work brings joy to others, but I do it mostly for myself. My work is so dull during the week. I don't think I accomplish much. But then, when I get in my workshop and begin working with the wood when I get my hands on the wood and work it up into something beautiful, I am reminded of who I am and what I'm meant to be. When I'm making those toys, I sometimes say to myself, 'This is life as it is meant to be.'"*

Perhaps, in the light of today's scripture from Luke, he could say, *"This is the world as it is meant to be. This is reality. The other stuff I do, Monday through Friday, is the world as it is not meant to be."*

If you have been a student of philosophy you may have run across one of Plato's dialogues entitled, *Allegory of the Cave*. He said, *"We are like prisoners who are chained to the floor of a cave, forced to sit all day facing in one direction, toward the back wall of the cave. We can't move our heads far to the right or the left. All we can do is to sit and stare at the wall of the cave. Behind us, people move back and forth between us and the mouth of the cave. We can see their shadows reflected on the wall of the cave."*

*But that's all we can see—their shadows, their reflections cast upon the back wall of the cave from the sunlight at the mouth of the cave. The shadows sometimes carry objects in their hands. We try to make out what they are holding in their hands, but all we can see are the shadows.”*

*If we should be released from our bonds and turn around and look toward the mouth of the cave, the bright light would blind us. Gradually, our eyes might become accustomed to the light, and we would begin then to see things as they really are, but it would be a long, painful process of gaining our sight, of seeing things as they are. For now, all we've got is the shadows, mere silhouettes, and outlines of things as they are.”*

Thus, Plato taught that we ought not to take our perception of the world too seriously, as if what we perceived of the world were what is “*really there*.” We ought to question the images that come before our eyes, for some of them are deeply misleading. They are only the shadow, but not reality.

You may remember from the love chapter of I Corinthians 13 9 *For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 10 but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.*

Christianity resonates with Plato's allegory of the cave. We know that what the world regards as “*reality*” is often only a shadow, a poor imitation of the “*real thing*.” However, we differ in that we believe that reality is to be found, not through careful philosophical reflection but rather through God's gracious revelation. God, in Christ, shows us what the real world looks like.

Jesus preaches his Sermon on the Plain, hoping to enable us to see a whole new world, the real world, the world beyond the shadows and the sham. We believe that we only know what's what, what's real, through the gracious gift of God.

In the verses just prior to this, beginning in verse 6, you will notice that Jesus has healed a man with a withered hand. It is also significant for us to notice that He did this on the Sabbath. Then in verse 12 it says that “*Jesus went out to the mountain to pray, and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles.*”

This is where we hear the words, “*He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people...*” Luke goes on to suggest to us that “*the people had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.*”

It is then at this point that Jesus turns his attention away from the crowds back to His disciples and He then spoke to them the words we find in the rest of the chapter referred to as the Sermon on the Level Place. Of course, immediately we think we have heard this sermon in Matthew, on a mountain, Jesus' “*Sermon on the Mount*,” but this one is a bit different, in some significant ways. You will note that, at least in the beginning of this sermon, Jesus doesn't tell us anything that we are to do. Lots of people think that is the whole purpose of a sermon.

“*I come to church and listen to the preacher tell me what I need to do to lead a better life,*” or something like that. But this sermon is about people who are “*blessed*,” and people who are cursed. Jesus doesn't tell people what they are to do to be blessed; rather, he announces that certain people are blessed, others are cursed. So, the sermon really isn't about us. It is not about who is in and who is out. It is not about who is behaving correctly and who is misbehaving. Rather, the sermon is about God.

And, when we start thinking and talking about God we have to be real careful. Because it becomes very easy to mix up our concept of reality and what “*should be*” with what the scriptures teach us about

the true nature of God. We constantly want to domesticate a God who will not stand still for such a process.

What I mean by our attempts to domesticate God is that often we would like to take our story, our understanding, of what is real and bring God into in such a way that it validates that understanding for us. For example, we can take our values, our way of life, and even our church, and then take the story of God and try to wrap it into our story to justify things that God's story may not justify. The real invitation of God is for us to do just the opposite. We are invited to take the way God views the world and wrap our life's story, our values, and our faith around it.

In other words, we are invited to take God's concept of what is real and bring our life under that umbrella and attempt to live more authentic lives based upon that understanding.

In the scripture for today God is the merciful one who is *"kind to the ungrateful and the wicked"* (v. 35). Perhaps you thought if God is good, then that means that God punishes the wicked and socks it to the ungrateful. Well, think again, says Jesus. It is easy to be kind to people who are grateful for the kindness that we show them. It is easy to do nice things for good people. But this God that we've got is different from us. God is kind and good to the bad and the ungrateful.

And, if you thought the facts were that God is in the business of punishing the wicked and stringing up the ungrateful, then God's mercy and extravagant forgiveness is exasperating to us. For it is exasperating to find out that God does not fit our idea of God. The ending of the story of the Prodigal Son gives us a good example of this.

My suspicion is that we have read the sermons of Jesus so often that we have forgotten how revolutionary they are. They are quite unlike the laws which a philosopher or a typical wise man might lay down. Each one is a challenge.

The people whom Jesus called happy the world would call wretched; and the people Jesus called wretched the world would call happy.

Let us note that Jesus' entire sermon, at least the first half of it that we are listening to today, is a series of statements, assertions. The sentences, to quote my sixth grade English teacher, *"are in the indicative rather than the imperative mode."*

In a sentence, the grammatical mood conveys the speaker's attitude about the state of being of what the sentence describes. This may sound a little complicated, but it's simple enough: In the indicative mood, for instance, the speaker is sure that something is the case, while in the imperative mood the speaker desires that something should happen.

Jesus is simply stating the facts of life, the way things are—in other words giving us an idea of God's reality.

*"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God"* – the same people, whom we overlook, disregard, despise, and consider failures. Jesus looks around at those who are hungry and has compassion on them because in the Kingdom of God there should not be those who are hungry.

This first beatitude sets the tone for all that is to follow. The next two merely pronounce a reversal—the hungry will be filled and those who weep will laugh—the casual section of the first beatitude declares that the kingdom of God belongs to the poor. This is the second of 32 references to the *"kingdom of God"* in Luke.

But we must understand that the blessing of the poor neither idealizes nor glorifies poverty. It declares God's prejudicial commitment to the poor. The coming of the kingdom will bring a reversal of fortunes.

Jesus is telling us what is the case now that the Kingdom of God has come. The reality is stated and Jesus is inviting us to be a part of that reality.

And then he says, *“Blessed are you who are hungry now for you will be filled”* – the same hungry people whom we expect must be lazy or inept or they wouldn’t be asking for handouts.

*“Blessed are those who weep now, for you will laugh”* – the same whiners and complainers who are always acting like they have had it worse than anyone else.

*Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for this is what their ancestors did to the prophets.*— because you are abrasive, or holier-than-thou, or self-righteous, the way so-called “religious” people often are.

God, this God we encounter in the Gospel of Luke, blesses those whom we tend to curse.

Then the preacher, the Christ, moves to an even less attractive part of the sermon as he curses the rich, the content, the happy, and the morally upright (in short, people like most of us), but there’s no need for us to spend time on all of that, right?

I expect it was a shock that day, for all the good, church-going, Bible believing folk to see a portrayal of God that did not fit their remembered Sunday school images of God. I expect it was a shock as great as climbing up out of the darkness of a deep, dark cave into the blinding light and reality of the sun at midday.

Perhaps this is the point of preaching. It is not first to tell us what to do, but first to help us see. The acting follows the seeing. Perhaps that’s why Jesus begins this sermon with healing (6:18).

He begins with healing as a sign that a whole new world is breaking in to the old world, a new reality is shining through the darkness where those on the bottom are now brought to the top, and those who are poor, weeping, and despised are put at the center of what God is up to in the world.

Where then is the key to this sermon? It comes in verse 24. There Jesus says, *“Woe to you who are rich because you have all the comfort you are going to get.”*

The word that Jesus uses for “have” is the word used for receiving payment in full of an account. What Jesus is saying is this, *“If you set your heart and bend your whole energies to obtain the things which the world values, you will get them—but that is all you will ever get.”* On the other hand, if you set your heart and mind and energies to the ways of the Kingdom God brings to us you will gain life abundant.

So, as I have already said, today’s sermon doesn’t tell you to go out and do anything, though, by implication, you may be thinking about something that you need to do.

That’s why Christians live as we try to live, not simply because Christ has commanded us to live in a certain way, but rather we live in a certain way because of the way we now know the world to be. We want to get in step with the way things are, reality, now that God in Christ has entered the world.

In fact, if you read the rest of the story following today’s Gospel lesson you will begin to see what that life we are called to might look like in terms of the things we do in response to what Christ has taught us.

The invitation is to see what is real in the mind of God and then to attempt to bring that reality into the way we attempt to live life. And we must remember there are always choices involved. The Sermon on the Level Place ends with a vivid description of the consequences of choices.

This is the invitation given to those who will respond to the call of Christ. What is our response today?