

**“Who They Are and What They Do”**  
**Luke 6:17-38; Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40**

**Psalm 37**

<sup>1</sup>Do not fret because of the wicked; do not be envious of wrongdoers,

<sup>2</sup>for they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb.

<sup>3</sup>Trust in the Lord, and do good;

so you will live in the land, and enjoy security.

<sup>4</sup>Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

<sup>5</sup>Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act.

<sup>6</sup>He will make your vindication shine like the light, and the justice of your cause like the noonday.

<sup>7</sup>Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him;

do not fret over those who prosper in their way,

over those who carry out evil devices.

<sup>8</sup>Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath.

Do not fret—it leads only to evil.

<sup>9</sup>For the wicked shall be cut off,

but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land.

<sup>10</sup>Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more;

though you look diligently for their place, they will not be there.

<sup>11</sup>But the meek shall inherit the land,

and delight themselves in abundant prosperity.

<sup>39</sup>The salvation of the righteous is from the Lord;

he is their refuge in the time of trouble.

<sup>40</sup>The Lord helps them and rescues them;

he rescues them from the wicked, and saves them,

because they take refuge in him.

Introduction and Poem

At this point in Luke’s gospel, Jesus has just begun his ministry and he has already attracted a reputation, a coterie of disciples, and crowds.

They're coming from the country, coming out from the big city of Jerusalem, coming in from places on the coast—a considerable journey—and they're not just coming with some vague theological idea like "hope" or "covenant" or "fulfillment." They come with their diseases, with their unclean spirits, with their poverty and hunger and sickness.

Julia K. Dinsmore was and still is a person who lives on the edge between solvency and homelessness. She's not an addict; she's not severely mentally ill; she's not irresponsible. She wrote this poem several years ago:

My name is not "Those People."

I am a loving woman, a mother in pain,  
Giving birth to the future, where my babies  
Have the same chance to thrive as anyone.

My name is not "Inadequate."

I did not make my husband leave us—  
He chose to, and chooses not to pay child support.  
Truth is though; there isn't a job base  
For all fathers to support their families.  
While society turns its head, my children pay the price.

My name is not "Problem and Case to Be Managed."

I'm a capable human being and citizen, not just a client.  
The social service system can never replace  
the compassion and concern of loving grandparents, aunts,  
uncles, fathers, cousins, community—  
all the bonded people who need to be  
But are not present to bring little ones forward to their potential.

My name is not “Lazy, Dependent Welfare Mother.”

If the unwaged work of parenting,  
homemaking, and community building were factored  
into the gross domestic product,  
My work would have untold value...

My name is not “Ignorant, Dumb, or Uneducated.”

I got my PhD from the university of life, school of hard everything.  
I live with an income of \$621 with \$169 in food stamps for three  
kids.

Rent is \$585....That leaves \$36 dollars a month to live on.

I am such a genius at surviving,

I could balance the state budget in an hour.

Never mind that there's a lack of living-wage jobs.

Never mind that it's impossible to be the sole emotional, social,  
spiritual, and economic support for a family.

Never mind that parents are losing their children  
to gangs, drugs, stealing, prostitution, the poverty industry,  
social workers, kidnapping, the streets, the predator...

My name is not “Lay Down and Die Quietly.”

My love is powerful, and the urge to keep my children alive will  
never stop.

All children need homes and people who love them.

All children need safety

And the chance to be the people they were born to be. The wind will  
stop before I allow my sons to become a statistic.

Before you give in to the urge to blame me,  
the blame that lets us go blind and unknowing  
into the isolation that disconnects

your humanity from mine,

Take another look. Don't go away.

For I am not the problem, but the solution.

And...my name is not “Those People.”<sup>i</sup>

### **Luke 6:17-26**

<sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. <sup>19</sup>And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

<sup>20</sup>Then he looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

<sup>21</sup>“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

<sup>22</sup>“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. <sup>23</sup>Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

<sup>24</sup>“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

<sup>25</sup>“Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

“Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

<sup>26</sup>“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”

### **Luke 6:27-38**

<sup>27</sup>“But I say to you that listen,

Love your enemies,  
do good to those who hate you,  
<sup>28</sup> bless those who curse you,  
pray for those who abuse you.

<sup>29</sup> If anyone strikes you on the cheek,  
offer the other also;  
and from anyone who takes away your coat  
do not withhold even your shirt.

<sup>30</sup> Give to everyone who begs from you;  
and if anyone takes away your goods,  
do not ask for them again.

<sup>31</sup> Do to others as you would have them do to you.

<sup>32</sup> “If you love those who love you,  
what credit is that to you?  
For even sinners love those who love them.

<sup>33</sup> If you do good to those who do good to you,  
what credit is that to you?  
For even sinners do the same.

<sup>34</sup> If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive,  
what credit is that to you?  
Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again.

<sup>35</sup> But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.

Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High;  
for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.

<sup>36</sup> Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

<sup>37</sup>“Do not judge, and you will not be judged;  
do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.  
Forgive, and you will be forgiven;  
<sup>38</sup>give, and it will be given to you.

A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

### The Sermon

Elsewhere, in other accounts and at other times, he will speak to people on a mountain—a place to which you *climb*;  
he and his people will *ascend*  
to a place where he speaks words that *elevate*,  
*lift up* our eyes, our minds, our hearts, our souls, our heads,  
that put our feet on *lofty* ground.

Those stories are about moving to an elevated position in order for human life to encounter the divine.

Typical of Luke, the story today happens at a level place: the Greek word *pedinou*, for “level” or “plain,” carries within it the idea of being a good place to have your feet: on level ground.

Other times, people will have to be brought up, to move closer to the heavens, for the encounter with the holy to take place.

This time, Luke says, specifically: “*He came down with them*, and he stood on a level place.”

They came together from all walks of life, from every direction, from all over the place, each from their own circumstances.

They gathered around to hear him, and as he spoke to *all* of them, he was also speaking to *each* of them.

And in at least one way, it was probably the first time for many of them that they were all—all—on a level place with each other.

Some will go away from Jesus' sermon thinking, "Surely not I, Lord?"

Some will go away thinking, "OK, let me just remember these things to do, and then I'll get a quid pro quo, this full measure of which he speaks."

Others will think, "If I can just remember to do those things, then I'll be on the right side, and I'll have earned God's favor."

And some will be convinced that, as he spoke to the crowds gathered from all over—city, country and shoreline, poor and mourning and rich and laughing—they will be convinced that what they heard was a set of statements that added up to a question, asking each of them: who do *you* say that you are, and what do you mean to be?

It's important to practically all of us, I daresay, that people speak well of us. It's good for us to prosper and thrive and flourish, and that means money. Other things too, definitely, but in a world darkened by poverty, it's important to name the goodness of the security of having some money, in the bank and in the pocketbook.

It's also good to have abundance at the dinner table: to be able to make not only healthy choices for food, but enjoyable ones, and even to splurge from time to time.

And God knows it's good to laugh.

So when we're standing there at that level place and Jesus is saying,

“Blessed are you who are poor; blessed are you who are hungry,” we all, in Christian sympathy, say, “Amen. God bless them. I’ll share a little food with them; I’ll support SVCM and Bounty & Soul and Hand in Hand and do so willingly and sacrificially in gratitude for what I’ve got.”

And when he says, “Blessed are you who weep,” we pray for those people, and we cry with them.

And when he says, “Blessed are you when people hate you, and exclude you, and revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man,” I can look at people who are dealing with all of that and think, “Yeah, you know, that’s true: As long as you’re sharing God’s demanding word with humility, and not just spewing your own opinion under the guise of self-justifying statements like, ‘Hey, I’m just being honest,’

there are times when a faithful person will have to share ideas that don’t sit easily or comfortably with everybody in the room—  
ideas that may threaten structures  
that have been painstakingly built and defended  
over lifetimes, over centuries.

For some reason that never goes over real well.

The way Matthew tells it, everybody can fall under this blessing. I may or may not be what anybody would classify as “poor,” but maybe Jesus means “poor in spirit,” and that I definitely am from time to time. And I’m not just saying that because of Indiana’s basketball season.

So here today, at this level place where we all meet on the same footing, I keep waiting for Jesus to assure me that he doesn’t just mean “the poor” as in the people whom I call the cops on if I see them in my neighborhood.

I'm waiting for him to turn and look at me and say, "And, I mean, all of you: you should interpret 'poor' as covering anyone who has any kind of affliction at all, economic, physical, spiritual, whatever. I mean bless you *all*." I keep waiting for him to say that.

And finally he turns and looks in the direction of me, and the place where I grew up, and the place where I live now, and the people I grew up with, and my church and my country club and the good school I went to and my neighborhood, and as I smile a beatific smile at him knowing he is about to bless me, too, he says:

"Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

"Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

"Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

"Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets."

And all of a sudden, standing on this level place isn't quite so much fun anymore.

What did we ever do to make him so unpleasantly inclined toward us?

The people coming out to hear Jesus were an oppressed people in an occupied land. But within that context, there were some who profited off the losses of others—start with the tax collectors, corruption was sown into their line of work practically from the get-go, and the more heartlessly they took advantage of people's poverty, the more successfully they were doing their jobs.

And that corruption went all the way up to the top, as far as the social, political and economic structure was concerned.

So now, having turned the world upside down by blessing the downtrodden and seeing woe in the doing-all-right crowd, Jesus said to them all:

“I say to you that listen:  
poor and wealthy,  
hungry and full,  
just and unjust,  
unpopular and popular:

“I say to whoever listens to me:

Love your enemies,  
do good to those who hate you,  
bless those who curse you,  
pray for those who abuse you—  
not pardon, not excuse, not submit to or be victimized by,  
but pray for those who abuse you.”

After 9/11, I took a lot of phone calls from people who wanted to know what in the world we were supposed to do with “turn the other cheek” after an outbreak of evil like that.

Over the centuries, and through many of our lifetimes, it’s been easy to get tangled up in the weeds of trying to dissect scripture passages like this one.

But in the first place, I don’t really hear this as a laundry list of specific things to do; and in the second, the gospel is specifically *not* about quid pro quo: I do this so God will give me that.

God already showers us with incomparable, incomprehensible love. We’ve already got the full measure, pressed down, shaken together. God has given us life and love and people and beauty and truth and purpose.

To me, it sounds like Jesus is saying: what I am describing is who you are. Not your to-do list, but who you are.

In this world you will be judged and categorized, and sometimes unfairly but sometimes quite accurately, thank you very much.

Woe to you who have while others lack, and don't do anything about it beyond feeling sympathetic.

Woe to you whose laughter is the thoughtless cackling of the ignorant who stand on the shore while people are drowning within your reach.

But to those of you who have been trampled down and taken advantage of and left by the side of the road, *as well as* to those who, wittingly or unwittingly, are part of the oppression, I have good news:

God has a different world in mind: and not just for some next life so that some have to live in misery and die in obscurity while others live in ignorant arrogance and die and go to hell, but a vision for this world, which like all worlds is also God's domain, also God's creation, also the place where the Spirit is free and the will and judgement of God will not be trifled with.

In this world, those who hear God's voice will not only love the people who already love them; they will not only do good to the people who do good to them; they will not only be generous toward the people from whom they can expect to get something in return.

This is a vision of the kingdom of God. And it is a vision of who each one of us can be.

Who would you say that you are?  
And, who or what do you mean to be?

In considering that, maybe the question is not, "What would the person who you want to be do differently than you do?" but, "Do you know that you are already a beloved child of God?"

Do you believe Maya Angelou when she writes,  
“You alone are enough; you have nothing to prove to anybody”?

Do you believe Desmond Tutu when he says:

“Dear Child of God, you are loved with a love that nothing can shake,  
a love that loved you long before you were created,  
a love that will be there long after everything has disappeared.  
You are precious, with a preciousness that is totally quite immeasurable.  
And God wants you to be like God. Filled with life and goodness and  
laughter—and joy.

“God, who is forever pouring out God’s whole being from all eternity,  
wants you to flourish.  
God wants you to be filled with joy and excitement  
and ever longing to be able to find what is so beautiful  
in God’s creation:  
the compassion of so many, the caring, the sharing.

“And God says, Please, my child, help me.

“Help me to spread love and laughter and joy and compassion.

“And you know what, my child? As you do this...you discover joy. Joy,  
which you had not sought, comes as the gift, as almost the reward for  
this non-self-regarding caring for others.”<sup>ii</sup>

To bring this good news to each of them and to all of us,  
Jesus came down with us, as we sat, lay, stood or were held,  
and put his feet right with ours, on a level place.

Keith Grogg  
Montreat Presbyterian Church  
Montreat, NC

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<sup>i</sup> Julia K. Dinsmore, *My Name Is Child of God...Not 'Those People': A First Person Look at Poverty* (National Book Network, Kindle Edition), 21-22

<sup>ii</sup> His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu with Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World* (Avery: 2016), 275, 298