

“To You Who Are Hearing”
Luke 6:27-38; Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40

Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40

- ¹Do not fret because of the wicked;
do not be envious of wrongdoers,
²for they will soon fade like the grass,
and wither like the green herb.
³Trust in the LORD, and do good;
so you will live in the land, and enjoy security.
⁴Take delight in the LORD,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.
⁵Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act.
⁶He will make your vindication shine like the light,
and the justice of your cause like the noonday.
- ⁷Be 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.
⁸Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath.
Do not fret—it leads only to evil.
⁹For the wicked shall be cut off,
but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land.
¹⁰Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more;
though you look diligently for their place,
they will not be there.
¹¹But the meek shall inherit the land,
and delight themselves in abundant prosperity.
³⁹The salvation of the righteous is from the LORD;
he is their refuge in the time of trouble.
⁴⁰The LORD helps them and rescues them;
he rescues them from the wicked, and saves them,
because they take refuge in him.

Introduction to Luke Passage

Jesus came down the mountain with his inner circle of disciples into an even greater crowd of followers: people who needed help, people who knew poverty, sickness, hunger, and helplessness in the face of calamity. And that was just in their individual circumstances. As a nation, this was a dominated people in an occupied land, subject to all the usual dynamics when power is being held over—and used to contain—the powerless or the less privileged.

It was to those people that Jesus has just delivered a counterintuitive message of blessings: “*Blessed* are you who are poor—yours is the kingdom of God. *Blessed* are you who are hungry now—you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now—you *will* laugh...”

And then the equally counterintuitive warnings, or laments: “Woe to you who are rich; woe to you who are full; woe to you who are laughing now...”

Those people likely were not the ones who were there at the time. There may have been exceptions: people in positions of authority within the Jewish population. But the people present at the time and directly hearing Jesus say these words are mainly, if not entirely, the ones who are on the underside of almost every equation.

And so, having established that his ministry of spreading of the Good News was already about to turn the world of the human order upside down, he went on with the lesson:

Luke 6:27-38

²⁷“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.

³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you.

³²“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.

³⁴If 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. ³⁵But 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.

³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

³⁷“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸give, 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

What are the things in life over which you have a choice?

We don't get to choose the time and circumstance into which we are born; we don't always get to choose how well equipped we will be to cope with whatever comes our way; we don't individually choose either the big picture or the nuances of the society or the culture in which we exist.

But as Jesus goes from the upside-down blessings and laments into the instructions for people who want to follow him, a choice is being announced:

“But I say to you that listen.”

Whatever he is about to say, and no matter who you are: first, you can choose to listen; and then, you can choose the astonishing life that he is about to offer—a profound life that starts right now.

“But I say to you, to those who are hearing...”

The Greek root *akou* (as in acoustic) is the same word whether it’s translated “hearing” or “listening.” In Matthew 13:13, Jesus says, “hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand,” but the words “hearing” and “listen” are both from the same root word.

In English, “to listen” implies making an effort to attend to what someone is saying, or to pay attention to what’s happening, or to tune in to things that ought to be heard. “To hear” is a little more passive.

You don’t usually find the same distinction between listening and hearing in New Testament Greek.

And right here, after announcing both the blessings of the poor who have no voice, and the woes of the powerful and those who feel heard, Jesus says: “But I say to you, to those who are hearing...”

And he announces an option, for any who will listen, for all who will hear—even these people who are caught up in life circumstances that feel so far out of their control.

Imagine living in a time and in circumstances where the certainties you used to take for granted felt like they were vanishing,

where everyone felt that international, national and even societal politics were fraught with menace and balanced on a knife-edge and dependent on the goodwill of people whose good will you are no longer sure you can count on,

a time and circumstance where the distance between the poorest of the poor and the most powerful wealthy had long since become a yawning chasm, and only grew more significant every year,

a time and a circumstance where disease stalked the land, and no one really knew for sure the extent of the damage it could do to one human life, let alone to all human life as we know it.

Those are the people to whom Jesus speaks: some eagerly following; some hoping to be convinced; some not sure they are buying it, and some just along for the ride.

No matter who you are, says Jesus: You may not be able to choose your circumstances, but you can choose to listen and to hear—even those of us who have degrees of hearing loss—and you can choose how you will be, and who you will be, *within* your circumstances, no matter what they might be.

Moment by moment, in each situation, whether you choose to make the decision that is invited by the awesome universal love of God, or the decision that is encouraged by the cynicism of the world around us, *we have the choice*.

The polarization and mutual disdain of our world in our time aren't exactly news. Somewhere in our hearts and minds, we can all feel Psalm 123, verse 3: "Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt."

Someone writing the other day from a national and interfaith perspective mentioned that with our civic life on a "slow boil," for many people in many congregations, "politics [is] squarely upstream of faith."ⁱ

In other words, all across the country and within every tradition and denomination, you will find good, intelligent, thoughtful people of faith, in these fraught, frustrated, fearful days, consciously or not, firmly

seated in their political disposition before they even start listening to and hearing the teaching and the truths of their faith.

First comes the world the way *I* want to understand it—the mindset that makes me most comfortable—and the fact that, in all matters of opinion, mine is right, and to speak otherwise is either stupidity or pure evil; so, now that we've got *that* firmly established, *and only as far as it works in that context*, go ahead and tell me about what Jesus wants with me.

And it's not like that's a recent development.

“But I say to you that listen,” said Jesus, turning the human order upside down—“For all of you who are listening; for any who will hear, I say to you:

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”

Well, hang on a second: there are justice issues here, as well as human well-being, and healthy (as opposed to toxic) relationships. It is never appropriate to encourage, enable, or tolerate the abuse of an abuser.

Clarifying—and I cite the New Testament scholar Sharon Ringe, but lots of others, too:

A literal slap on the cheek is an act of violence, and it inflicts pain and can inflict damage, and for all those reasons it is entirely unacceptable.

Dr. Ringe points out that even more than the violence of it, the point of a literal slap was an attempt to humiliate someone. And a person of power could always get away with slapping somebody whom society agrees is an inferior.

By turning the other cheek, the victim “refuses to be humiliated, but instead takes control of the situation from the offender, who now [has to] decide whether to continue what has become a [kind of] game.”ⁱⁱ

Common robbery was illegal, but in occupied areas of the Roman Empire, a Roman soldier could legally commandeer a citizen’s property at will—could even take away somebody’s coat, in which case, Jesus said, give them your shirt, too. Now the person being victimized turns it upside down, and the taker is the one who is humiliated.

And when Jesus says, “Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again,” he’s saying, when “the poorest of the poor” come to you in need, don’t calculate what they’ll owe you for whatever you give them.

Now *you’re* the one with all the power, but that doesn’t mean you get to leverage it against somebody who’s in dire need and entirely at your mercy. Give something, period: what they may or may not choose to give you in return some day is not even a consideration; it’s totally irrelevant to your call to provide something for the person in need.

All of this is specifically *not* about switching places and then pressing your advantage over someone else, since they would do the same to you.

It’s about making the choice to turn the whole *world* upside down by doing to others just as you would have them do to you.

We’re not just talking about turning upside down the relationship equation of who’s got all the power and who’s at whose mercy.

We’re talking about turning the whole game board upside down, and saying, from now on, we all respect each other as people who are all equally inadequate before God, and all equally deserving of a chance at a dignified life with each other, free from poverty and hunger and hatred—and abuse. Imagine that.

This isn't only life-changing, it's world-changing. But if we're going to play our part in changing the world, it has to *start with* our lives—and in particular, this one small part of our lives over which we have control.

When the world is throwing its worst at you, you can choose to get down into the gutter and play that cynical game. Or you can recommit, and recommit, and recommit to the life of joy and gladness and gratitude that Jesus is inviting you into.

With every decision, you and I can choose not to be infected by the cynicism of a broken and brutal world. We can choose not to submit to the widely subscribed idea that being able to do whatever I want to do is, by definition, more important than doing what is best for my neighbor and for the world.

We can choose not to be part of—and can choose to stand actively against—the cruelty of a world that celebrates the acquisition, expansion and mindless, entirely self-interested imposition of power—personal power, economic power, intellectual power, military power, physical power, societal power, political power, demographic power.

And instead—for all who will listen, and for all who will hear—we can choose to follow where Jesus leads. We have already seen and felt and known what that can do.

What does it look like in your life—because I know you have seen it—when you do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God?

What does it mean to you, in your specific circumstances, to do to others as you would have them do to you?

To love your enemies.

To be angry, but do not sin (Ephesians 4:26).

To speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15).

To be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you (Ephesians 4:32).

To love one another with mutual affection; to outdo one another in showing honor (Romans 12:10).

To offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted (Isaiah 58:10).

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, to live peaceably with all (Romans 12:18).

To love one another, as Jesus commanded, “just as I have loved you” (John 13:34).

Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep (John 21:15-17).

Do this in remembrance of me (I Corinthians 11:24).

No matter who we are or what our circumstances, we get to choose.

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ⁱ Elizabeth Lynn and Mark Ramsey, “All the Rage,” in The Ministry Collaborative, Digging a Deeper Well (email), February 17, 2022

ⁱⁱ Sharon Ringe, “Exegetical Perspective” (Luke 6:27-36), in Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson, eds., Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Vol. 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 167