

When you read about this gospel passage in most commentaries, it's called "The Sermon on the Plain." The moniker differentiates it from the "Sermon on the Mount" that we find in the gospel of Matthew. The name of the sermon seems a bit redundant as there is plenty of difference. There are no woes in Matthew. This, however, is the gospel of Luke, the last of the synoptics to be written. And Luke is adamant about how people are being treated in his world. Luke is the gospel that inspired Gustavo Gutierrez and others in Latin America to develop the movement called liberation theology.

Liberation theology assumes that God has made a preferential option for the poor. It preaches that the Christian Church needs to be a catalyst for change that eradicates poverty. For Christians, it isn't enough to empathize and care for poor people. It means getting to know poor people and becoming friends with them. It requires complete identification with the poor. Liberation theology is not for the faint of heart.

We could say the same thing about Jesus' frank talk to his disciples.

There are a few bible commentators who decided to call this the Sermon on the Level. One reason being is that Jesus is beginning to “level” with his chosen ones about what discipleship really means for them and for us. We are not to put our trust in things, especially things like wealth or power or prestige. We may have these now, but they could be taken away from us at any moment.

In doing so, Jesus joins a long line of prophets, Jeremiah being a prime example, who warns the people not to trust in mortals. It is only God who is worthy of our trust.

There is another way to look at this Sermon on the Level. By establishing a standard of “levelness” we can approach that level from different perspectives. In doing so, we can begin to see the deeper meaning of the blessings and woes that Jesus is talking about.

Let me illustrate with something rather mundane. The weather.

Let's say that the perfect level of weather is what I often refer to as a "San Diego Day": Highs in the 70's; a bit of a breeze; beautiful blue sky; and white puffy clouds. It doesn't rain much there. Maybe a little in June, during their "June gloom," but for the most part you can plan an outdoor event and be sure you won't have to seek shelter at the last minute. So, a "San Diego Day" is hereby established as the center bubble on the level.

Let's say it's January and you live in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The temperature, without the wind chill factor, is 0 degrees. You're sweating because you just finished shoveling 24 inches of snow out of your driveway.

Now let's say it's August in Phoenix, Arizona. The temperature – without humidity, because of course it's a dry heat, is 110 degrees. You are sweating because you walked between your apartment building and your car.

If you were the Minneapolis-January person, a weather-level of 70 degrees would be amazing! If you were the Phoenix-August person, the weather-level of San Diego would look pretty inviting as well.

From a purely numerical temperature standpoint, though, the Minneapolis person appears to be advancing while the Phoenix person appears to be retreating. The San Diego native doesn't see any change at all.

Now, let's say that (economically speaking) the perfect level of living would be to have enough to eat, shelter from the elements, sanitary services, education and healthcare for all. The perfect level would be the optimum: everyone would be treated equally.

Economics isn't weather. The world is getting more and more economically polarized, making it less and less possible to live at the optimum level. Even if only a few people live to the max, it means that others (usually many more than those living maximally) are driven under the optimum line. As one end of the fulcrum rises, the other has no way to go but down. And given where you are on that tilted line, optimal living can either look like vast improvement or vast disaster.

My sisters and brothers, we are all living on the rising end of the fulcrum. Even if we don't think we are, most (if not all) of us in the nave today have plenty of clothes to wear, food to eat, and shelter from the storms of weather or Wall Street. Jesus' warnings of woe are for us, even though we don't necessarily want to acknowledge it.

So what do we do? How do we let go of the things that we cling to in order to shift the pendulum optimistically?

The first thoughts that come to me are to give more money to organizations that serve the poor. Give away the things I don't need. It's not about whether something gives me a spark of joy, it's about providing something of value to someone who needs it.

I know can't begin to solve the whole mess by myself. That's what's so frustrating. And, every time I give something material or service-oriented up, does that make it harder for someone to find work? This is much more complicated than writing a bigger check or clearing out my library.

There is a way to make a good start. I can still do all of the things I thought of before, but I think what God would appreciate more is for me to see the people at the bottom of the fulcrum the way God sees them. On God's level plain, we are valued the same. The saint is loved as much as the sinner.

You and I can begin to ease the woes of Jesus' Sermon on the Level by leveling with ourselves, each other, and anyone in power that "others" are "equals".

Because we are children of God, we need to treat each other with respect and dignity. Because we are followers of Jesus, we need to respectfully remind people with power and prestige to do the same. We must remember to trust in God. As the psalmist says:

Blessed are those who trust in the LORD,
whose trust is the LORD.
They shall be like a tree planted by water,
sending out its roots by the stream.
It shall not fear when heat comes,
and its leaves shall stay green;
in the year of drought it is not anxious,
and it does not cease to bear fruit.

Trust God. Do not fear. Bear fruit.

Sounds like a plan!