

Psalm 1

Luke 6:27-49

February 24, 2019

The Sacrament of Baptism with Cooper Clayton Hall

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

GOOD NEWS OR BAD ADVICE?

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In the conclusion to his Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6, Jesus shares more than twenty short teachings about how to live. Taken separately, each of them makes a good bumper sticker or entry on Pinterest:

- * Love your enemies.
- * Do good to those who hate you.
- * Do to others as you would have them do to you.
- * Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.
- * Do not judge.
- * Do not condemn.
- * Forgive, and you will be forgiven.
- * Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?

But, when you take all of Jesus' sayings together, what do they mean for your life and mine?

As many of you know, I have kept a quote journal for many years. This week I decided to look through my journal and find what different people have said that might be commentary on the ideas Jesus shared with his disciples and the crowds out there on that level place. This is an unusual approach to preaching, but I'd like to share some of what I found. If there is any particular order to this, it's that I move from the slightly cynical to the more thought-provoking to (at least for me) the more convicting. Some of the quotes refer to teachings from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 rather than Luke's Sermon on the Plain, but the sentiments are the same. Occasionally I'll throw in something I found in my reading this week that hasn't yet made it into my quote journal, but most probably will.

Let's begin with the cover of a "Wizard of Id" comic book from the early 1970's. The king of Id stands on the palace balcony and addresses his peasant subjects — "Remember the Golden Rule!" Somebody in the crowd asks, "What's that?" and another peasant says, "Whoever has the gold, makes the rules!"

Of course, there is the Platinum Rule: "Do unto others as God has done unto you."

This one is attributed to any number of people, including Steve Martin: "Before you judge someone, walk a mile in their shoes. That way, you'll be a mile from them, and you'll have their shoes."

A more serious version of that one can be found in *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee: “You never really know a man until you understand things from his point of view, until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”

This one used to be posted at the registration desk in Dr. Mott Blair’s office when it was located a few blocks down on East Main Street: “There is some bad in the best of us And there is some good in the worst of us. But there is not enough good in any of us To talk about the rest of us.”

Our own Earleene Southerland shared this gem with me the other day: “Spite work does not pay.”

In one of his sermons, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. quoted an unknown preacher: “Lord, we ain’t what we want to be; we ain’t what we ought to be; we ain’t what we gonna be; but thank God, we ain’t what we used to be.”

Dr. King’s reflection on who we are as people redeemed in Jesus Christ offers us hope, and echoes Jesus’ teaching about what it means to be “children of the Most High.”

Of course, you and I both know how resistant we can be to the kind of change needed to live the kind of life Jesus is talking about in his Sermon on the Plain.

Flannery O’Connor, the 20th century short story writer from Georgia, commented in one of her letters, “All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful.”

One hundred years earlier, the great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy said pretty much the same thing, “Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.”

Eleven years ago, in February 2008, the big pink house in Watha, just down the road from us, was the scene for the filming of Sue Monk Kidd’s story *The Secret Life of Bees*. In her novel, she writes, “People, in general, would rather die than forgive. It’s that hard. If God said in plain language, ‘I’m giving you a choice, forgive or die,’ a lot of people would go ahead and order their coffin.”

This one showed up on my Facebook feed just this week: “Be kind to people, not because of who they are, but because of who YOU are.”

It’s probably time to move away from the bumper sticker variety quotes, and consider some ideas I’ve collected that are deeper commentary on what Jesus is getting at in his Sermon on the Plain. An overarching, umbrella idea about what it means to live according to Jesus’ teachings can be found in this observation, “We act in the world as it is on behalf of the world as it should be.”

As the young priest in the small French village comes to realize in the thought-provoking movie *Chocolat*, “We can’t go around measuring our goodness by what we **don’t** do.” He says this in his Easter Sunday sermon, after he throws away his carefully prepared manuscript that had already received the mayor’s stamp of approval.

Reverend Jason Davenport, who spent four years here at Wallace Presbyterian when his dad was the minister, posted on Facebook years ago, “We aren’t called to be like other Christians. We are called to be like Christ.” I remember contacting Jason

and asking him to send me that quote because, as so often happens, when I went looking for it in my Facebook feed, I couldn't find it!

Jason points us in the right direction. Jesus' teachings are about how to live as God's people. Ernest Best puts it this way, "The gospel is not a set of abstract truths to be announced, but a way of life to be lived."

In a similar way, William Placher, writing in his wonderful book called *Struggling with Scripture*, says, "If we study the whole Bible, its central concerns come through clearly enough. We learn that we are all sinners, that God loves us anyway, and that knowing our salvation rests on grace frees us to live in the service of God without worrying about how we will be rewarded."

Dr. Amy-Jill Levine is a Jewish professor of New Testament Studies at Vanderbilt University Divinity School in Nashville. In her book called *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, she says, "The kingdom of heaven is not, for the Jewish Jesus of Nazareth, a piece of real estate for the single saved soul; it is a communal vision of what could be and what should be. It is a vision of a time when all debts are forgiven, when we stop judging others, when we not only wear our traditions on our sleeves, but also hold them in our hearts and minds and enact them with all our strength."

In 1980, Rev. Eugene Peterson, who produced the much used version of the Bible called *The Message*, wrote a book called *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*. This is how he described the meaning of the gospel for the people of God — both in Jesus' day and in our day — "The truth of God explained their lives, the grace of God fulfilled their lives, the forgiveness of God renewed their lives, the love of God blessed their lives."

On Wednesday afternoon, my good friend, Bill Goodnight, came through the door of the church office building calling out, "Eggs! The egg man is here! I've got nice, fresh eggs!" Bill is the pastor of the Potts Memorial and Oak Plain Presbyterian Churches. He also raises chickens and brings their eggs for us to give away in our Helping Hands Food Pantry.

Bill and I talked about preaching on Jesus' Sermon on the Plain last Sunday and today. He wanted to know how I understand what it means to say someone is "Blessed . . ." as in the beatitudes from last week's gospel lesson. I told Bill I don't think Jesus was teaching, "Do all of these things...love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, don't judge, don't condemn, etc. so you can go to heaven." I don't think Jesus was saying, "Do these things in order *to be* blessed." I think Jesus was describing what it means to live as God's people in God's kingdom, right here, right now.

Then I shared with Bill my favorite quote in the collection I had put together for today's sermon. It comes from Dallas Willard, who was an American philosopher who wrote much about Christian spiritual formation. About the gospel (and, so I think, about Jesus' teachings in his Sermon on the Plain), Dallas Willard wrote, "The gospel is less about how to get into the kingdom of Heaven after you die, and more about how to live in the kingdom of Heaven before you die."

There must be value in hearing Jesus' teachings as pithy, distinct sayings. But, the inevitable danger lurks. We either turn Jesus' teachings/call about what it means to live as God's people in the kingdom of God before we die into some kind of "to do" list to earn God's favor and love, or we end up using such a list to compare ourselves to others ("Well, I may not always love my enemies. I may not always keep from judging others. But at least I'm not like so-and-so!").

You know, I could have preached a much shorter sermon this morning. After reading the gospel lesson, I could have simply said, "Go and do likewise." Maybe I could have added, "Good luck!" But that would have been an irresponsible use of Scripture, not to mention an ultimately frustrating experience for all of us.

Don't get me wrong! We ought to go and do likewise, as Jesus teaches us. But we need to go and do likewise only when we depend, first and foremost, on God's grace in Jesus Christ. Several weeks ago, I planned my preaching according to the lectionary readings. Luke 6:27-49 is the reading for this seventh Sunday after Epiphany. However, I didn't plan to baptize Cooper Hall this morning. Today is the day that worked best for Cooper's family.

But isn't it wonderful to hear Jesus' teachings about our "way of life" in God's kingdom on the same day Clayton and Casey bring Cooper to be baptized? In light of what Jesus has to tell us/command us about what life in God's kingdom looks like, it was appropriate that we used our time of confession for the renewal of our baptismal vows. Those vows — whether we originally made them ourselves or they were claimed on our behalf — are the well-built foundation of God's grace, mercy, love, forgiveness, and call in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Think about what Jesus taught about being "children of the Most High" as I remind you of the final vow we renewed this morning: "Do you intend to be Christ's faithful disciples, trusting in his promises, obeying his Word, honoring his church, and showing his love, as long as you live?"

As I was reading for today's sermon, I came across a word to preachers trying to figure out how to preach on Jesus' teachings. I love this quote: "No one comes to church on Sunday already thinking, 'I would really like a challenge today; perhaps I will be asked to love my enemy.'" And yet, we have come to church on this Sunday and we hear Jesus say exactly that — plus a lot of other things! As someone said about what Jesus teaches — "This text is gospel/good news for the committed. Anyone with a low level of commitment will think this 'good news' is 'bad advice.'"

The good news, especially today as we celebrate Cooper's baptism and remember our own, but also every day, is this: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." (Ephesians 2:8-10)

Let us pray: God of goodness and mercy, be the light of our salvation and sustain us. We submit to your will, that we should love you with our everything and love our neighbors, and even our enemies, as ourselves. Renew us and transform us by your steadfast love into the people of God. Amen.