

12 - BLESSINGS AND WOES

The next section of the Gospel (6:20-49) is frequently referred to as “The Sermon on the Plain.” There can be no doubt that it is modeled on Matthew’s “Sermon on the Mount” (Matt. 5:1-7:29). Like Matthew’s, Luke presents a collection of only somewhat related teachings on various themes, but is only about one quarter of the length.

Some of the teachings in Luke are found elsewhere in Matthew. Neither can be seen as recording an actual event, yet have their own theological purpose. Narrated close to the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, they “corroborate and enlarge upon summary statements and other specific accounts of Jesus’ preaching and teaching, and thus emphasize the importance of that aspect of his ministry.” (Ringe, 91.)

Luke’s collection can be divided into four parts: blessings and woes (6:20-26); relationships with enemies and benefactors (6:27-35); mercy and judgment (6:36-42); personal integrity (6:43-49).

Only four beatitudes are found in Luke compared to nine in Matthew. Luke used the second personal pronoun, *you*, directed at his immediate audience whereas Matthew used the third. Ringe suggests that this pointed to a large audience being present, although this cannot be proved. In the audience were some who would have benefitted from the status quo and so would hear the woes directed at them.

Luke’s first two blessings differ from Matthew’s significantly in that for Luke it is the economically

poor, not the poor in spirit, who benefit from the realm of God. Matthew may have thought of “the meek” in the same way following texts such as Isaiah 61:1, 66:2 and Psalm 37:11. We would call them the “marginalized.” More important however is the reversal of fortunes that characterizes God’s project. Luke had emphasized this element of justice for the oppressed from the very beginning in the hymns and stories of the nativity and in introducing Jesus’ ministry by appropriating the Jubilee text of Isaiah 61:1-2 in 4:18-19.

Luke’s second beatitude (6:21) also sounds as though the need is physical rather than ethical as in Matthew. In the imagery of the Hebrew scriptures, hunger was often linked to the yearning for God’s salvation from disaster caused either by nature or violent human actions such as foreign oppression or war. The satisfaction of hunger thus became one of the signs of God’s presence (Psalm 107:4-9, 35-37; 146:5-10; Isaiah 32:6; 49:7-10; 65:13.)

The last two blessings also speak of the pattern of reversal between present suffering and coming joy. In each case they refer to God’s agenda. Similarly, the list of woes do not refer to human behaviour to be avoided or changed to avert disaster. God’s justice requires that those who have not enjoyed the same blessings must now have their turn. This may have been the meaning of Jesus’ sermon in Nazareth (4:14-30). The woes would cause dismay among many that God had other things in mind for them while extending generous blessings to those had been marginalized. No wonder they ran him out of town.

