

Character and Commitment

³⁹ And he told them a parable, “Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit?

⁴⁰ No disciple is superior to the teacher; but when fully trained, every disciple will be like his teacher.

⁴¹ Why do you notice the splinter in your brother’s eye, but do not perceive the wooden beam in your own?

⁴² How can you say to your brother, ‘Brother, let me remove that splinter in your eye,’ when you do not even notice the wooden beam in your own eye? You hypocrite! Remove the wooden beam from your eye first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter in your brother’s eye. ⁴³ “A good tree does not bear rotten fruit, nor does a rotten tree bear good fruit. ⁴⁴ For every tree is known by its own fruit. For people do not pick figs from thornbushes, nor do they gather grapes from brambles. ⁴⁵ A good person out of the store of goodness in his heart produces good, but an evil person out of a store of evil produces evil; for from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks.

[vv.46-49 are not part of the Sunday gospel, but are integral to Luke’s narrative]

⁴⁶ “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ but not do what I command?⁴⁷ I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, listens to my words, and acts on them.⁴⁸ That one is like a person building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when the flood came, the river burst against that house but could not shake it because it had been well built.⁴⁹ But the one who listens and does not act is like a person who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, it collapsed at once and was completely destroyed.” (Luke 6:39-49)



A detail of The Parable of the Mote and the Beam | Domenico Fetti, 1619 | Metropolitan Museum of Art NYC | PD-US

The Liturgical Year

An astute observer will notice that in Ordinary Time, depending on the year, we "skip" several Sunday liturgies between the portions of Ordinary Time that come before and after the Lent/Triduum/Easter cycle. The skips are not consistent from year to year. For example, in Ordinary Time of 2022, we omitted 4

Sundays (9th through 12th). In 2023, we omitted only 3 Sundays (8th through 10th). Why the variation you might ask?

While Christmas Day is affixed to December 25, the date of Easter Sunday can fall anywhere between March 22 and April 25, as it is the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox. Therefore, Ash Wednesday, which precedes Easter Sunday by 46 days, can fall anywhere between the 4th and 10th Weeks of Ordinary Time. In 2025 Easter falls a little later and so this is one of those years when we celebrate the 8th Sunday.

Up until now

In the 5th Sunday readings (Lk 5:1-11) we have the account of the calling of the first apostles from their labors as fishermen: “*Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.*” (v.10). Luke 5 quickly recounts miracles that we see as Messianic signs (curing a leper, curing the man on the stretcher/forgiving sins, answering why He ate with sinners), and then moves into Luke 6 where he narrates encounters with the Pharisees and scribes who question Jesus on the Mosaic Law. And then, Jesus “reconstitutes” a new Israel as he calls 12 apostles.

In the 6th Sunday gospel (Luke 6:17, 20-26) and the 7th Sunday (Luke 6:26-38) we have the Lucan version of the great interpretation of the Mosaic Law: The Sermon on the Plains (Matthew’s account is referred to as the Sermon on the Mount). With the apostles present the Sermon takes on the character of an official instruction for the whole church assembled under its leaders.

Luke’s “Sermon on the Plain” sets forth Jesus’ apostolic instruction/ethic for daily life in detail. The sermon begins with a recognition of the disciples’ blessing as a result of God’s grace. The rest of the sermon gives the ethical response to the grace of being such a beneficiary. Disciples are to live and relate to others in a way that stands out from how people relate to one another in the world. Jesus points the disciples to understand the nature of their heavenly Father: love and mercy – even to those who do not deserve it – including ourselves.

This is the transformation needed to become a disciple – and then go into the world to bring others into the Kingdom.

Commentary.

“*And he told them a parable...*” (v.39) Interestingly, nothing that follows is actually considered a parable; all are better seen as wisdom sayings, proverbs or similes. Be that as it may, the purpose of this part of the sermon is clear. Luke signals a change of direction within Jesus’ discourse and draws Sermon to a close with a call to add obedience to the hearing of Jesus’ message. In verses 43-49 the word “(to) do” appears five times and becomes the catchword along with “doing good” that appeared earlier in the sermon. Herein appears a principal call of Luke-Acts: the practical demand of the gospel with emphasis on behavior – not a sole emphasis – but highlighted nonetheless. The issue is one of character and commitments becoming action in the life of the believer. To attempt to separate character - commitment - action is to succumb to hypocrisy (vv.41-42,46). A person’s heart will be revealed by the fruit of their actions (v.44).

The Blind Leading the Blind. “*Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit?*”⁴⁰ *No disciple is superior to the teacher; but when fully trained, every disciple will be like his teacher.*

The proverb that a blind person cannot lead a blind person or else they will both fall into the pit is found in Matt 15:14. Its use in Luke however taps into his metaphorical use of the term “blind” to refer to those who lack faith or those who lack insight. Jesus began his ministry announcing the recovery of sight for the

blind (4:18), and later he will give sight to the blind (7:21–22; 18:35–43; cf. 14:13, 21). Signs not only of his messianic power, but also the gift of faith.

Luke 6:40 effectively sums up Luke’s understanding of discipleship: When fully prepared, the disciple will be like the teacher. Parallels to the saying occur in Matt 10:24–25 and John 13:16; 15:20. Jesus’ role as teacher has already been juxtaposed with teachers who fail to understand and who question his authority (5:17–22). Jesus asks, in effect, ‘whom will you follow?’

Taken with the preceding saying, about leading the blind, the two sayings establish the appropriate status for a disciple; disciples must be better qualified than those they seek to lead, but a disciple can never be greater than the teacher. The appropriate goal is to strive to be like the teacher. The two verses also underscore the necessity of seeking trustworthy, insightful guidance.

The first part of the sermon has offered a new understanding of the values of heart and action called for by God. Even if the listener decides to choose Jesus as the teacher, to what degree will they follow? Will they act on this new understanding? Will they persevere to become “*fully trained*” and become like their teacher?

Jesus’ words also establish the measuring rod for discipleship. This is important because the point at which some join Jesus’ circle of influence is not always evident; repeatedly we are introduced for the first time to persons who seem already to have begun to embody the values of Jesus’ message and to manifest them in their practices. Complicating matters further, such persons—for example, a woman from the city (7:36–50), a wealthy toll collector (19:1–10), and a condemned bandit (23:40–43)—are judged according to widely held societal norms as persons living outside the will of God, as sinners. How can we recognize them otherwise? Jesus provides the measure: They are “like the teacher” and have refused the option of blindness. How is this manifest? Their actions and words (see 6:43–45) provide the evidence.

Splinters and Logs. ⁴¹ *Why do you notice the splinter in your brother’s eye, but do not perceive the wooden beam in your own?* ⁴² *How can you say to your brother, ‘Brother, let me remove that splinter in your eye,’ when you do not even notice the wooden beam in your own eye? You hypocrite! Remove the wooden beam from your eye first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter in your brother’s eye.*

This expression did not originate with Jesus. Aristotle was not the first to give voice to the common expectation that those who reprove others ought not suffer from the same shortcoming. In context it resonates with the caution not to judge others in the preceding section (vv. 37–38). Taken independently, the parable exposes the common human predilection to point out even the slightest faults in others while being blind to our own, even though they may be much greater (cf. Matt 7:3–5).

Culpepper (152), in his commentary on Luke writes:

“The first danger threatening discipleship is the inclination to judge others, but how can we help making judgments? What sort of person would we be if we made no moral judgments? We are constantly faced with the need to make discriminating moral choices. Learning to judge between right and wrong and developing an acute sense of rightness and justice while being able to spot hypocrisy, moral compromises, and oppression reflects a heightened spiritual awareness. What, then, does Jesus mean by this warning not to judge others?

“Jesus was talking about a particular kind of judgment. The judgment in view is the inclination to condemn others for their faults and failures. Disciples do not grow better by comparing themselves with someone else. Some of us have gotten so sharp that we can put someone else down with just the quickest flick of the tongue. We are black belts in innuendo and faint praise. Not a speck in our brother’s eye escapes our notice. ‘The Smiths are fine people,’ we say. ‘I just don’t know why they bought a house in that neighborhood.’ ‘Aunt Bea, bless her heart, just never would let Arnold stand on

his own feet.’ ‘Oh, I love that dress. It’s just right for you. Did you find it on sale?’ Of course, we would never judge others. Sometimes we merely ‘speak the truth in love’ with a little too much relish.

“The warning not to judge and the invitation for the one without sin to cast the first stone are twin sayings that cut the ground from beneath smug superiority. Their sin may not be ours, but ours is just as bad. Judging is the sin of those who are blind to their own faults. It is the obsession of those who seek to make themselves better, not by lifting themselves up, but by bringing others down. It is the mock justice of those who presume to know what others should do. The log in our own eye hardly qualifies us to judge the faults of our brothers and sisters.”

These few verses serve to warn those who attempt to substantiate their own piety through censuring the shortcomings of others as acting inconsistently. Their hearts and actions are inconsistent. While they themselves posture for public adulation, their behavior is not determined by God – which is the ultimate measure of holiness.

Producing Good Fruit. ⁴³ *“A good tree does not bear rotten fruit, nor does a rotten tree bear good fruit. ⁴⁴ For every tree is known by its own fruit. For people do not pick figs from thornbushes, nor do they gather grapes from brambles. ⁴⁵ A good person out of the store of goodness in his heart produces good, but an evil person out of a store of evil produces evil; for from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks.*

This third expression regarding “good fruit” is also found in various places in Scripture and in a variety of contexts (Matt 7:16–20; 12:31–35; Ps 1:3; 58:12; Isa 3:10; Jer 17:10; 21:14). In Matthew in particular, this parable is related to the warning concerning false prophets. Elsewhere the metaphor of fruit is for the character of one’s deeds. Jesus is saying that what is required of a disciple is not cosmetic alteration, even removing a log from one’s eye, but a genuine goodness of heart.

Note that there is not a call for a one-kind-fits-all “fruit.” Each plant bears its own kind of fruit: vines bear grapes and certain trees, figs. Similarly, thornbushes do not bear figs, nor brambles grapes. Yet, the nature of the tree determines the quality of its fruit. James 3:12 makes the same point - *“Can a fig tree, my brothers, produce olives, or a grapevine figs? Neither can salt water yield fresh.”*

The agricultural insights are carried over into the sphere of human character, conduct and interpersonal relations. Jesus could hardly have underscored with greater perceptiveness the inescapable relation between human being and doing. For the disciples, there must be a consistency between who one is and what one does, the inner and the outer, the invisible and the visible. The former will inevitably be exposed by the latter. Discipleship, therefore, requires not just good deeds. It requires integrity and a purity of heart such as one sees in Jesus himself.

It is the integrity/purity that, in a way, transforms the person into a storehouse of good or evil deeds which emanates from the deepest core of the person – the heart. What we say is but a reflection of who we are. As the Anglican scholar John Nolan notes: “Whether one likes it or not, what one produces is finally a product of what one is.”

The Foundation. ⁴⁶ *“Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ but not do what I command?⁴⁷ I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, listens to my words, and acts on them.⁴⁸ That one is like a person building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when the flood came, the river burst against that house but could not shake it because it had been well built.⁴⁹ But the one who listens and does not act is like a person who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, it collapsed at once and was completely destroyed.”*

Green (280) pointedly asks: “If one assumes an essential consistency between the constitution of a plant and the nature of its yield, and if one allows the metaphorical application of that insight into the sphere of human affairs, then Jesus’ question has achieved its forceful aim: How is it that humans can be so

inconsistent when it comes to their dispositions vis-à-vis the ways of God? In this instance, ‘Lord’ is a term of great respect; those who use it would thus be designating Jesus as their patron, the one to whom they owe allegiance. How can they speak of allegiance and not grant it?”

Beyond the question of consistency between heart and action, there is the deeper question of Lordship, commitment, and fidelity. In other words, if you call Jesus “Lord” – on what basis, what measure do you do so? The answer has already been given: be transformed and engage in the loving of enemies, the doing of good, and lending without expectation of return—that is, in practices determined by the gracious character of God (vv. 27–38).

But then who has called Jesus ‘Lord’ at this point? Not the Pharisees and scribes. In fact, only Peter and the leper (5:8,12), but then neither would seem to be the focus of Jesus' comment. It would seem that Jesus is looking ahead to the road these listeners may (or may not) walk. In a way it parallels Jesus’ “warning” to the people of Nazareth in the synagogue. There folks were eager to have done for them what was done in Capernaum, but only the ones who were transformed such that they love, do good, and give will be such recipients. Jesus' words certainly seem to fulfill his role as the one who would bring division within Israel (3:17; 2:34).

The account of the two builders (*cf.* Mt 7:24-27). Luke’s version of this parable differs from Matthew’s in several respects: (1) Luke does not contrast the two builders as wise and foolish. (2) In Luke, the good builder builds on a foundation (something that was unusual in Palestine), while in Matthew the good builder builds on the rock. (3) In Luke, the house is assailed by a flooding river (singular), while in Matthew the threat is rain, floods (plural), and winds.

Assailed by a flooded river, the one, well built, stands strong, while the other suffers great ruin. The image has its parallel in v.35, where those whose practices reflect the values of the inbreaking age of salvation are promised a great reward. Such doing, rooted in Jesus’ message, manifests the true nature of a person in a way that is relevant in the final judgment. Hearing without doing has its ‘rewards’ also.

Culpepper (153) writes, “Another of the dangers to discipleship is that of living our lives without a firm foundation. The parable of the two builders vividly draws the contrast between doers of the Word and those who are hearers only. Jesus’ teaching was different from that of the scribes and Pharisees because he did not appeal to the authority of his teachers, nor did he dispute fine points in the interpretation of the Law. Instead, he told vivid stories drawn from ordinary life. Everyone had seen houses under construction, and they had also seen houses destroyed by storms. Luke makes the point graphically. The wise builder ‘dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock’ (6:48). Dig deep and lay the foundation of your life on the Word of God. Keep digging until you get in touch with the revelation of God in the person of Jesus, and then build your life upon that Rock.

A Final Thought

This also from Culpepper (152):

Once there was a man who took great pride in his automobile. He performed all the routine maintenance on schedule and kept the car clean inside and out. When he could afford to do so, he began to trade cars every couple of years so that he always had a relatively new vehicle. He also traded up, getting a larger, more luxurious car each time. Then he began to trade every year so that he would always have the current model. Eventually, he got to the point where he would buy a new car, drive it home, and leave it in the garage. He refused to use it because he didn’t want to put any miles on it or run the risk of getting it scratched. So the new car just sat—pretty, but never used. This could be a parable of the way some people treat their faith, becoming less and less active in church while professing more and more strongly that they are committed Christians.

Jesus knew that it would not be easy for anyone to respond to the call to discipleship. The simple call, “Follow me,” meant such a radical change of life. Knowing how difficult it would be, Jesus concluded the sermon with sayings that warn about the urgency of putting discipleship into practice.

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