

## SERMON ON THE PLAIN

Did you know that there is a contest every year for the World's Ugliest Dog?

Seriously, a contest for ugly dogs. It seems that people like and actually own ugly dogs.

I just can't get into ugly dogs. Or hairless cats – ugh – why would anyone want one of these ugly animals. If I have a dog or a cat, it needs to be cute.

Sometimes when we hear scriptures we wonder if Jesus would be one of those “Ugly Dog Owners.”

Al just read for us what is frequently referred to as the Sermon on the Level Place sometimes referred to as the Sermon on the Plain.

It starts off by saying that Jesus came down with them and stood on a level place where there was this great crowd.

Let's look at who was in this crowd. First of all we had his Apostles – The main 12 Disciples. Now in the paragraph right before this one, Jesus had just spent the whole night praying, then chose his 12 main followers – called Apostles.

The Bible tells us who they were – we had Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas – Another James, Simon the Zealot, Judas – son of James and then our famous Judas who betrayed Jesus later.

Okay, so we have the recently chosen 12 Apostles there – and now we add in a great number of his regular followers – called Disciples.

Then the Bible tells us that there was a great multitude of people from neighboring towns and all over.

It says that they had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Then it goes on to say that ALL in the crowd were trying to touch him because power came out from him and healed all of them.

So picture in your mind Jesus and his 12 Apostles coming down to this level place with a huge number of people standing around to hear him and be healed by him.

All of them pushing closer to hear what he had to say, but more importantly, trying to touch him. Kind of like a bunch of ugly dogs just trying to get some loving.

They were all troubled with something. Many with physical ailments, maybe deafness, blindness, lameness – whatever it was.

But you know, I think that many of them were there for a different kind of healing as well. I think many of them were looking for a deeper healing. A healing of their minds and hearts and souls.

Knowing this, Jesus looked up to them and said, “Blessed are you who are poor - for yours is the kingdom of God” - Which I just picture about half of them getting up and saying, “Okay, I got my blessing, I am out of here.” And then I can just picture in the other half – one guy leaning over to the other and asking, “What did he just say? Blessed are the poor – he got that wrong – hungry are the poor.”

Back then – this stuff Jesus was saying was strange talk. See – it was all about power – and money. If you didn’t have money - you weren’t anyone. So now this Rabbi, or Prophet or Teacher or who knows, Messiah – says the poor are blessed. That couldn’t have been an easy way to start off that sermon.

Then Jesus went on to say, Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

And you know the guy in the crowd leaned back over to his buddy saying, “See, told ya, poor and hungry – he figured us out now.”

Then Jesus went on to say, “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh” – That sounds good, but when you are sad – sometimes don’t you just wonder if you will ever be happy again?

And then he went on to say, “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.”

I don’t know about any of you, but when I am excluded, hated, attacked or reviled, I usually don’t feel blessed. I feel pretty bad.

But let’s think again about who Jesus is speaking to. A great multitude of people – a bunch of ugly dogs - who came to him for healing. Maybe it was physical, maybe it was mental, maybe they had just lost a loved one and they were searching for the meaning to life and death.

The people he was speaking to weren’t the best of the best – they were hurt, injured, broken down, excluded, reviled – just like an ugly dog.

So on one hand, this sermon would appear that Jesus was just trying to build up their self confidence. But on the other hand it goes so much deeper than that.

Now many of you are familiar with the Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel of Matthew. It starts off pretty much the same with blessings. But the Sermon on the Mount goes into other teachings while this sermon – the Sermon on the Plain goes into - “the Woes.”

“Woe to you who are rich  
Woe to you who are full  
Woe to you who are laughing  
Woe to you when all speak well of you.”

Now at first – those sound really strange. How would being rich, not hungry, happy – laughing, and people speaking well of you be bad?

I have heard too many times of people reading this part of the Bible and getting upset about it. At first it sounds like we all need to be poor, hungry, sad and hated people. Some people take this part so literally they miss the total meaning in these scriptures.

So let’s take a moment and compare the blessings with the woes.

“Blessed are those who are hungry for you will be filled – and Woe to you who are full for you will be hungry.”

In this one – Jesus tells the one with the full stomach – that you can eat a meal, but a few hours be hungry again – never being permanently satisfied. But when he refers to the one who is hungry now – he is talking about spiritual hunger. One who is yearning and hungry to hear the Word of God – for this person will hear the Word and be filled with the Word of God – and hunger no more.

“Blessed are those who weep now, for you will laugh and woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.” I feel Jesus is simply trying to show us the reality in the world. Sometimes we are happy and sometimes we are sad. We need to remember – that although there are good times and sad times, God is still with us – we just have to remember to look towards him when we are happy, not just when we are sad.

“Blessed are those when people hate you because of Jesus and Woe to those who people speak well of.”

Now this is a little harder one. What Jesus is possibly saying here is that if you don't hide the truth about your faith – people know you are Christian by the way you walk, by the way you talk – no matter what – then you will be rewarded in heaven.

But those who don't follow their faith – they hide the truth of who they are – just to be popular and have people like them. Those who deny Christ just so people think highly of them, well, they may just have to explain why they did that to God one day. I am sure those words spoke to many people listening during Jesus' sermon.

Now the last one I want to talk about trips a lot of people up.  
“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours in the kingdom of God and Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.”

Now – this one isn't talking about money. I think, besides money and material things, this one is talking about our mindset.

During Jesus' time – and during our time, many people feel that all of their wealth, their material things, all the blessings in their lives have come from their own deeds.

*“Some God didn't have anything to do with it.”*

What we forget – sometimes a little too quickly – is that God has given us gifts and talents. Some of us have the gift of intelligence, others the gift of public speaking, some of us are great at playing the stock market, others managing people. No matter what our gifts, we all have to remember our gifts come from God and that we need to thank God for what we have in our lives.

Many times it is a little too easy to look towards ourselves and pat ourselves on our backs. While a little bit of self worth and pride are okay, we need to remember where all gifts and talents come from and acknowledge God for them.

This can be hard to do if we are very successful and rich. That is why Jesus says that those who are poor are blessed – because they don't have all of those things to get in the way between themselves and God from whom all blessings flow.

So the Sermon on the Level Place – or Sermon on the Plain – wasn't given to make us all feel warm and fuzzy. It was given to us to remind us of the good and bad in the world, the happy and the sad.

It was given to remind us to be Joyful with the blessings we do have in our lives. It was given to remind us - that what our culture considers ugly - Jesus blesses – and that ugly dogs are loved just as much as the pretty ones – and if they are loyal and loving, they are blessed.

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