

“AS YOUR FATHER ALSO IS MERCIFUL”: THE SERMON ON THE PLAIN AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF MERCY

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Although the Sermon on the Plain in Luke resembles the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, one crucial difference comes in the admonition given to each audience.¹ Following the Beatitudes and a redefinition of the scope of the Mosaic law, Matthew brings chapter 5 of the Sermon on the Mount to a crescendo by admonishing, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). In the Lucan version of this discourse, Jesus admonishes his followers to, “Be ye therefore *merciful*, as your Father also is *merciful*” (Luke 6:36; emphasis added). This divergence is curious. While it is quite possible that Matthew and Luke are recording two different sermons delivered by Jesus on separate occasions, the similarity in the language and the central location of each of the statements within its respective discourse suggest a possible link between the development of mercy and becoming perfect. The purpose of this paper will be to examine more closely the Savior’s admonition to “Be ye therefore merciful” in hopes of both shedding light

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on the intent of the Sermon on the Plain as well as opening up some possibilities as to the relationship between "perfect" and "merciful."

THE IMPORTANCE OF MERCY

In the Greek text of Luke 6:36, "merciful" is a translation of the Greek adjective *oiktirmon*, a term carrying special significance for understanding the true nature of God. This same term is used in the Septuagint when the Lord reveals his name to Moses upon Mount Sinai. In the Old Testament account of the Israelite exodus from Egypt, Moses attempts to reestablish the covenant relationship between the Lord and his people that had been severed due to Israel's unrighteous actions. As part of this process, the Lord reveals to Moses his true nature after Moses returns to Mount Sinai in Exodus 34. Moses had made a point of mentioning in the previous chapter that the Lord knew Moses "by name" (Exodus 33:12), and the Lord reciprocates this sacred action in Exodus 34:6–7 by revealing his own "name": "And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, The Lord, The Lord God, *merciful and gracious*, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." Recognizing the significance of this moment, Moses "made haste, and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshipped" (Exodus 34:8; emphasis added). The Hebrew word translated as *merciful* in verse 6 is *rachum*, a word that "above all conveys the essence of mercy," and "is a fundamental element of Yahweh's nature." While other Hebrew words, such as *hesed*, illustrate the fundamental goodness that God possesses, *rachum* expresses "the special favor shown by God in the face of a situation of sin and affliction."² When the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek, *rachum* was replaced by the Greek adjective *oiktirmon*,³ the same adjective used by the Savior when he admonished his listeners to "Be ye therefore merciful, even as your Father is merciful."

A further insight gleaned from the Exodus account relates to identifying the "Father" mentioned in Luke 6:36. Matthew 5:48 specifically refers to "your Father in Heaven," yet in the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus makes no mention of "in heaven" and identifies this figure solely as "your Father." According to latter-day revelation, Jehovah, the being who identified himself to Moses as "merciful and gracious" in Exodus 34, was in

reality the premortal Jesus Christ. Thus Jesus possesses the quality of mercy, or *oiktirmon*. Additionally, when Abinadi appeared before King Noah, he explained how Jesus fills the role of both the Father and the Son: “And because he dwelleth in flesh he shall be called the Son of God, and having subjected the flesh to the will of the Father, being the Father and the Son—the Father, because he was conceived by the power of God; and the Son, because of the flesh; thus becoming the Father and Son” (Mosiah 15:2–3). So when Jesus offers the admonition to be “merciful, even as your Father is merciful,” he could be referring to his Father in Heaven, as the Sermon on the Mount does, or he could be referring to his own role as Father. This is the view taken by Thomas A. Wayment, who notes that Luke 6:36 “refers to the Son instead of the Father as in Matthew.”³⁴ If this view is accurate, then the divergence between Matthew and Luke takes on further significance. Whereas in Matthew Jesus admonishes his disciples to become “perfect” like their Father in Heaven, in Luke’s account Jesus admonishes his disciples to become “merciful” just as he, the Savior, has become. One important aspect of the Sermon on the Plain, then, is that it presents a model for how we can, through developing the quality of mercy, become more Christlike.⁵ It provides a map of the transition from *natural man* to *merciful child*.

MERCY IN THE SERMON ON THE PLAIN

Before looking specifically at what Jesus says, let us consider the audience to whom he speaks. When Jesus begins his discourse, he speaks to a group identified by Luke as the *mathetai*, or disciples. The composition of Jesus’ audience is pivotal: these are not simply men and women who are passing by and happen to hear Jesus’ words, nor is the message intended for such. A few verses earlier (6:13–15), Jesus had gathered his disciples and from that number had chosen twelve to assist in the ministry. Now he offers these disciples, who likely include the recently called twelve, a lesson on what to do now that they have chosen to commit themselves to his ministry. That others have gathered to the plain to hear him is not surprising because of the many miracles that he has been performing, but they are likely not the intended audience. Rather, Jesus specifically addresses those disciples who have committed themselves to him and who have chosen to sacrifice and to follow. But follow how, and for what

purpose? Jesus is quite an impressive messenger, but what is his message? "Now that we have chosen to follow you, what do we do now?" may well be the question on their minds.

BEATITUDES AND WOES

And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said, Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are ye that hunger now: for ye shall be filled. Blessed are ye that weep now: for ye shall laugh.

Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake.

Rejoice ye in that day, and leap for joy: for, behold, your reward is great in heaven: for in the like manner did their fathers unto the prophets.

But woe unto you that are rich! for ye have received your consolation.

Woe unto you that are full! for ye shall hunger. Woe unto you that laugh now! for ye shall mourn and weep.

Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! for so did their fathers to the false prophets. (Luke 6:20–26)

Jesus begins his sermon with a series of four beatitudes (from the Latin *beatus*, usually translated "blessed") followed by a series of woes. The first of these blessings is found in 6:20: "Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God." It is likely that on one level Jesus is speaking economically, saying that the poor often look to God for comfort, while the rich look to themselves. But when read in the context of the entire sermon, a more significant reading takes shape. If Jesus is indeed discussing the transformative process from natural man to merciful child, he perhaps has in mind those who are poor "in heart" and those who are rich "in heart." In other words, the "way of life as a whole is envisaged, not merely economic conditions."⁶

In the Old Testament, particularly the Psalms, "poor" was sometimes used to capture the sense of spiritual piety (see Psalms 40:17; 72:2, 4, 12–13). Jesus himself had said earlier in the Gospel of Luke that he was

sent “to preach the gospel to the poor” (4:18), strongly suggesting that the appropriate understanding of “poor” is an acknowledgment of man’s dependence upon the Atonement. If Jesus is going to successfully teach the principle and power of mercy to his faithful disciples, they must understand one crucial thing: they cannot save themselves. They require the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Those who are “poor in spirit” have developed a sense of humility that can be molded into something greater. The rich man, according to Luke, believes that he needs no one else; he is satisfied with relying upon the arm of flesh. Significantly, this statement about the poor is located at the beginning of the sermon; Jesus does not wait until later on to mention it, since if his disciples cannot grasp this principle now, there is little use in continuing the lesson. Additionally, these “poor” do not receive the promise of a future kingdom but rather a reassurance that they are already entering it by choosing to follow him. Jesus says, “Yours *is* the kingdom of heaven” (the Greek present-tense *estin*, not the future-tense “will be”). The effect of this present tense is to “comfort men who suffer for being disciples and to invite men to become disciples and find that their needs are met by God.”⁷ Jesus’ statement is not a promise but a fact. Choosing discipleship is not an investment in your future alone but also in your present.

The Savior’s second and third beatitudes (6:21) continue the theme established by the “poor” in the previous verse. Jesus’ promise that “blessed are ye that hunger now: for ye shall be filled” emphasizes that hunger usually follows poverty and that a spiritual hunger logically follows the recognition that our souls need the merciful assistance of the Savior.⁸ However, there is one key difference between this verse and the previous one. Whereas in verse 20 Jesus stated that his disciples were *presently* in the kingdom, now he promises that the fulfillment of their hunger will occur at a future time. These images of spiritual feasting and hungering occur several times in scripture, often in the context of a future occurrence. For example, Isaiah describes the messianic banquet, an eschatological event that will occur on Mount Zion at the Savior’s triumphal return, as a time in which “the Lord of Hosts [will] make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined” (Isaiah 25:6). Building upon the theme of feasting, the Lord promises to those who reject him that “my

servants shall eat, but ye shall be hungry: behold, my servants shall drink, but ye shall be thirsty" (Isaiah 65:13).

The Savior's third beatitude in verse 21, "Blessed are ye that weep now: for ye shall laugh," continues the "present trial, future reward" pattern of the prior beatitude regarding hunger. Again, weeping can be viewed on one level as a form of physical grieving, such as over the loss of a dead relative or friend. However, in the context of mercy, these words become a lament for a world lost in sin and the pains and toils that follow. Jesus himself wept for this very reason while witnessing the wickedness of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41). However, at the Second Coming, the grief experienced in the present will turn to joy and laughter as the wicked state of the world is turned toward righteousness. During John the Revelator's vision of "a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21:1), he hears "a great voice" proclaim that "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes: and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (Revelation 21:3-4; see also Isaiah 60:20; 61:3; Jeremiah 31:13; Psalms 126:2, 5).

The fourth and final beatitude summarizes the toils and tribulations of discipleship. Deciding to follow Jesus does not automatically mean the path will be easy or free from pain. With this decision comes persecution and hatred as a sinful world rejects you and your message. Such has been the pattern from the beginning of the world, and so it will continue until the end. While it may seem paradoxical as to why God would reward those who follow him with pain and suffering, there is a great lesson to be learned through this process. The Prophet Joseph Smith once commented on the significance of adversity to our eternal condition: "You will have all kinds of trials to pass through. And it is quite as necessary for you to be tried as it was for Abraham and other men of God, and (said he) God will feel after you, and He will take hold of you and wrench your very heart strings, and if you cannot stand it you will not be fit for an inheritance in the Celestial Kingdom of God."⁹ Pain is a necessary facet of progression and growth. It tempers and strengthens us, emotionally and spiritually. We gain a greater knowledge of what it means to hurt, to suffer, and to lose. But once we have experienced these tribulations, once we have passed through the thorns to reach the glade, are we not

better prepared to assist those who are now walking the path we have just walked? Do we not acquire a depth and an understanding of their pains and their sufferings? A certain amount of irony exists in that through teaching us how to be merciful God chooses to set his mercy aside, at least in the short term.

Unlike the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, which changes topics with the conclusion of the beatitudes, Luke's record follows the beatitudes with a series of four woes that parallel the beatitudes both in topic and in meaning (6:24–26).¹⁰ While there are certain qualities required of all those who follow the Savior, such as humility or the ability to endure and overcome trials, there are also qualities which can cause one to depart from the Savior and fail to inherit the celestial kingdom. Even though the audience for Jesus' sermon was the disciples, they were not immune to the temptations of the adversary. Having chosen to follow the Savior, the pressure to yield to the desires of the world would likely be amplified as the disciples progressed through their mortal journey. Here Jesus indicates some of the pitfalls that might serve to lead them astray. The words "rich," "full," and "laugh" stand in stark contrast to "poor," "hunger," and "weep." Just as true disciples recognize that they stand in need of the Savior's mercy and grace, even to the point of hungering for it, the "rich" and the "full" have fallen into the trap of self-sufficiency; they believe that they have all they need and require nothing further. The fourth woe brings this idea out most explicitly by warning against the time "when all men shall speak well of you" (6:26). The flattery of the world can stand as our own personal great and spacious building, deterring us from seeking after the tree of life. As Jesus reminds us, it is the false prophet who wins universal acclaim. The message of the true prophet tends to arouse within his listeners a discomfort that often leads to his rejection. A final key to understanding the "woes" is understanding that the English word translated as "woe" is the Greek *ouai*, a term not usually employed to condemn or indict the wicked. Rather, *ouai* is best understood as similar to the English "alas" and a term that often introduces an expression of pity or compassion, not a threat.¹¹ Even when speaking of those who will reject him in favor of the empty security of the world, Jesus still finds room for compassion and mercy. He may condemn the sin, but he still feels love for the sinner.

JESUS' IMPERATIVES

But I say unto you which hear, Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you,

Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you.

And unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek offer also the other; and him that taketh away thy cloke forbid not to take thy coat also.

Give to every man that asketh of thee; and of him that taketh away thy goods ask them not again.

And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise. (Luke 6:27-31)

Jesus' pity and concern, rather than condemnation, for those who choose the world over the light segues into his next discussion. The opening words in verse 27, "But I say unto you which hear," suggest that what follows will be the main point of the sermon. The beatitudes and the woes set forth the qualities of the righteous disciple, and now Jesus will explain why those qualities are necessary. For Jesus, the measure of true discipleship is the capacity for love and mercy. But love for whom, and in what manner? Jesus quickly arrives at the thrust of his message in verses 27 and 28 with the use of four imperatives: "love," "do good," "bless," and "pray." All these actions are key parts of discipleship, and most true followers of Jesus would gladly agree to perform good deeds or pray, but Jesus does not make it that simple. These actions, he insists, must be done for your "enemies" and those who "hate you" and "curse you." Among the Jews it was customary to love their neighbors and hate their enemies (see Matthew 5:43). Jesus' admonition was not merely to express a general love or to abstain from evil deeds but to actively love and pray for those who are our enemies! How surprised must the disciples have been as they heard these stipulations from the master! Perhaps expecting additional praises or blessings, they had instead received new responsibilities, and quite difficult ones at that. In addition to these commands, Jesus also told his disciples that when someone "smiteth thee on the one cheek offer also the other; and him that taketh away thy cloke forbid not to take thy coat also. Give to every man that asketh of thee; and of him that taketh away

thy goods ask them not again” (6:30). Why would Jesus ask these things of his disciples?

Significantly, the first of Jesus’ commands is to “love,” the English rendering of the Greek imperative *agapate*. As opposed to English, which has only one word to express love, Greek has four words, each of which expresses a different level of love. For example, *eros* expresses a passionate love; *philia*, the love shared between friends; and *storge*, a natural affection. But *agape* reflects something deeper and more inward. *Agape* “relates for the most part to the love of God, to the love of the higher lifting up the lower, elevating the lower above others. . . . It is a giving, active love on the other’s behalf.”¹² This same verb *agapao* is used by John in John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (emphasis added). *Agape* also most accurately reflects the love Jesus himself has for us. We, as fallen mortals, are prone to sin and are desperately in need of the love of a higher being to lift us up. If we are to follow in the footsteps of the Savior, we must learn to love as he does—not the love of a casual relationship or even the love between lifelong friends, but a merciful love. This type of love is a crucial component of the Atonement. In issuing a command to “love your enemies” (Luke 6:27), Jesus is asking the disciples to do what he does: to extend love and mercy to those for whom justice would otherwise dictate a harsher punishment. Mercy is an expression of love. Before Jesus can tell us to be merciful, he must tell us how to love. Jesus gives his mercy to all those who are in need of it. He does not ask us to buy it or to earn it through our labors. The Father did not send his Son to be sacrificed because of some cold, contractual obligation. The Father and the Son act out of love, and if we wish to follow them, so should we. Just as he blesses us or prays for us or does good for us, he expects the same attitude and actions from us.

RECIPROCITY, JUSTICE, AND MERCY

For if ye love them which love you, what thank have ye? for sinners also love those that love them.

And if ye do good to them which do good to you, what thank have ye? for sinners also do even the same.

And if ye lend to them of whom ye hope to receive, what thank have ye? for sinners also lend to sinners, to receive as much again.

But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil.

Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.

Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven;

Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again. (Luke 6:32–38)

In these verses, Jesus expounds on the concept of reciprocity and how it relates to justice and mercy. Verse 31, known as the Golden Rule, demonstrates the principle of reciprocity: "And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise." The idea that a reciprocal relationship ought to exist between the followers of Christ was not new. Leviticus 19:18 states, "Love thy neighbour as thyself." More contemporary to the time of Jesus, the great Jewish teacher Hillel said, "What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary thereof."¹³ The ethical ideal of a reciprocal, horizontal relationship—namely that you ought to act toward your neighbor with the same attitude and behavior which you expect from them—was a rather common idea in both Jewish and Hellenistic cultures. In verses 32–34, Jesus takes this idea to a new level and introduces a reciprocal, vertical relationship between man and God. In other words, the way we treat others dramatically impacts the way God will treat us.

Jesus begins his exposition of the Golden Rule with verse 32. From one perspective, the Savior's point is a simple one: love is more than just loving those who love you. This horizontal relationship must be more than reciprocal; it must be merciful. True love requires mercy. By definition mercy is more than merely showing compassion and kindness to those who might return the same sentiment; it is showing compassion and kindness to those who do not. If we reciprocate how we are treated, it becomes easy to justify acting in a hateful or spiteful manner when that

is how we are treated by others. In the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus teaches that this *horizontal* relationship, the Jewish concept of “an eye for an eye,” must be trumped by the *vertical* relationship between God and ourselves. Whether other people reciprocate our mercy or not, God always will. If we want God to demonstrate his mercy toward us, it behooves us to be merciful toward others.

The key to unlocking the nature of this reciprocal relationship comes from the phrase “what thank have ye?” repeated three times in verses 32, 33, and 34. This statement is a perplexing one for many scholars who are unsure of how to understand the Greek words *poia hymin charis estin*. More literally, the Savior’s question is: “What *charis* is this for you?”¹⁴ The key word here is *charis*, usually translated in the New Testament as “grace.” *Charis* is a powerful word and one that occupies a central place in the theology of Paul, which holds that the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross brought salvation to mankind through the acquisition of grace or *charis* (see Galatians 2:21; Romans 4:6; Ephesians 2:8–9). Interestingly, among the synoptic authors, the word is unique to Luke. Prior to the Sermon on the Plain, Luke had used the term *charis* in an episode that perhaps foreshadowed the teachings in Luke 6. According to Luke, when the Savior began his ministry, he returned to his hometown of Nazareth and, while in the synagogue, interpreted a passage from Isaiah. Jesus’ interpretation prompted the people to marvel “at the gracious words [literally *words of grace*] which proceeded out of his mouth” (Luke 4:22). Now, while addressing his disciples, the Lord asks, “Where is the grace in these actions?” Why? If the disciples are going to follow in his footsteps and attempt to become like him, then they must understand the true nature of grace. Jesus does not impute his grace only to a few friends but to everyone who desires it through forming a covenant relationship. Grace and mercy are related because it is through Christ’s merciful act that he can extend his grace to us. Additionally, as Jesus remarks in verse 35, this gift must be given “hoping for nothing again.” The Savior does not establish some eternal scale through which we “pay him back” for his grace, and we should not expect others to pay us back for our mercy.

However, the Savior does promise us that if we do these things with mercy, expecting nothing in return, then our “reward shall be great, and [we] shall be the children of the Highest” (6:35). There is a paradox

where eternal salvation is concerned, namely that there are some things you can obtain only by not looking for them. Matthew records a similar approbation by the Savior in Matthew 16:25: "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it." The Savior stands as the prime example of one who "lost his life," and to follow him we must also lose our life for his sake. But what reward awaits us if we take his wisdom to heart? Jesus' answer in verse 35 is that those who follow him have the potential to become children of the Highest. In one sense, we are all children of God because he is the Father of our spirits. But on a deeper, more personal level, the process of becoming true children of God means that our actions and thoughts reflect those of our Father. This is not merely a superficial resemblance to God but one *engraved* in our souls, a lasting part of who we are. When John the Baptist first began to preach in the area around the Jordan River, he warned the Jews not to say that "we have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, That God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham" (Luke 3:8). Just because the Jews were descended from Abraham, that did not make them true children of Abraham. Just because we are spirit children of God does not entitle us to be known as children of God.

In his epistle to the Romans, Paul taught that, "We are the children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may also be glorified together" (Romans 8:16–17). These powerful words of Paul teach us that if we are able to become the sons and daughter of God, then we also become heirs to all the Father has and joint-heirs with Christ. We inherit all that he inherits. How, then, do we become children of God? How do we develop within ourselves the capacity to be found worthy of such a rich and wondrous reward? Jesus answers these inquiries in a simple yet profound statement that provides the crux of this great sermon: "Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful" (Luke 6:36). Significantly, the word translated "be" is the Greek imperative *ginesthe*, the present tense signifying the process of *becoming* rather than merely *being*. Each of us must *become* merciful. It is a progression. It may not be an easy process, but becoming someone truly different requires a change of heart, not a sudden change in appearance.

Having enlightened his audience as to the true nature of mercy in verses 6–31, the Lord now returns to the principle of reciprocity and further elaborates upon the vertical relationship between God and man. This elaboration takes on the form of four commands, issued in verses 37 and 38: “*Judge not*, and ye shall not be judged: *condemn not*, and ye shall not be condemned: *forgive*, and ye shall be forgiven: *give*, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again” (emphasis added). A true disciple understands that judgment and condemnation are the purview of a God who knows all things. As mortals, we must not condemn others; instead, we ought to act mercifully, offering forgiveness even for actions which we may feel strongly are wrong. In return for acting mercifully, the Lord makes the following promise: “With the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again.”¹⁵ Remarkably, what Jesus appears to be teaching is that he will treat us the same way we treat others. If we choose to judge and condemn others, holding grudges and withholding forgiveness, he will treat with a similar judgment. Yet if we offer our forgiveness and mercy to all, he will shower us with mercy and forgiveness as well.¹⁶ Instead of acting under a retributive system of “an eye for an eye,” Jesus and his disciples now operate under the umbrella of “grace for grace.”

PARABLES AND A PROVERB

And he spake a parable unto them, Can the blind lead the blind?
shall they not both fall into the ditch?

The disciple is not above his master: but every one that is perfect shall be as his master.

And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye,
but perceivest not the beam that is in thine own eye?

Either how canst thou say to thy brother, Brother, let me pull out the mote that is in thine eye, when thou thyself beholdest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, cast out first the beam out of thine own eye, and then shalt thou see clearly to pull out the mote that is in thy brother’s eye.

For a good tree bringeth not forth corrupt fruit; neither doth a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.

For every tree is known by his own fruit. For of thorns men do not gather figs, nor of a bramble bush gather they grapes.

A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh.

And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?

Whosoever cometh to me, and heareth my sayings, and doeth them, I will shew you to whom he is like:

He is like a man which built an house, and digged deep, and laid the foundation on a rock: and when the flood arose, the stream beat vehemently upon that house, and could not shake it: for it was founded upon a rock.

But he that heareth, and doeth not, is like a man that without a foundation built an house upon the earth; against which the stream did beat vehemently, and immediately it fell; and the ruin of that house was great. (Luke 6:39–49)

To further reinforce the principle he has just taught, Jesus relates a proverb to his listeners: "Can the blind lead the blind? shall they not both fall into the ditch? The disciple is not above his master: but every one that is perfect shall be as his master" (6:39–40). Jesus' words here make perfect sense; obviously a blind man cannot reasonably lead another blind man. But what does this statement mean in the context of the sermon? Jesus has just taught that a true disciple understands the nature of grace, has obtained the qualities of mercy and love, and is willing to treat others in a merciful manner. The blind man, then, is the man who does not understand these principles. Everyone he convinces to follow him is led along the same blind path. This is not acceptable for Jesus, for this belief will lead only to a "ditch" (possibly a metaphor for hell). Because the blind cannot lead the blind, Jesus places the responsibility to lead upon his disciples. The logical conclusion we may draw from these verses is that those who see and understand should lead. The disciples must acquire a firm understanding of Jesus' doctrines not only so that they themselves

do not become blind but also that they will be able to lead others along the true path. The significance of this teaching extends beyond the disciples' own salvation to the salvation of those they will convert. It is imperative that the disciples grasp these principles now. Additionally, it is the goal of a true disciple to become like his master—to become, as Jesus reminded the Nephites, “even as I am” (3 Nephi 27:27). If the image of Christ is not engraven upon their souls, then they have not joined with the Savior but have strayed from him. But if they have become as the master, then they have become “perfect.” There is no greater reward.¹⁷

Jesus concludes his sermon with commentary on *inward* versus *outward* discipleship. It is one thing to stand up and volunteer to fight for the cause, but another to submit wholly to the Savior. Jesus first condemns those who behold the mote that is in their brother's eye but perceive not the beam in their own eyes (6:41). These men are referred to by Jesus as “hypocrites,” a Greek word meaning “actors.” These are the individuals who, perhaps because the seed of the Savior's message has not taken firm root, assuage their own impiety through criticism of another's shortcomings, no matter how small or insignificant, such as a mote. As a result, they ignore their own deeper spiritual crises. These people may look the part of piety, but their devotional acts are a facade, and until they can strip away the facade and look deeper into their inconsistent hearts, they will be unable to remove their own spiritual impediment, or beam.

No matter how good they are as actors, they are unable to hide their true spiritual identities from God, who looks “on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). It is impossible to fool God, a teaching Jesus illustrates in Luke 6:43–45 through the example of two trees: a good tree bears good fruit, and a corrupt tree bears corrupt fruit. We are who we are, and our actions will demonstrate that, just as a tree will produce fruit similar to itself. A rotten tree will not produce good fruit, and a rotten heart will not produce good works. To commit to the discipleship of Jesus is not a commitment to be taken lightly or passively, for Jesus expects more than just righteous action; he expects righteous desires and attitudes as well. Why call out “Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?” asks Jesus in Luke 6:46. If you choose discipleship and acknowledge him as your master, then it is your responsibility to become like him, for, as he had previously said, “Every one that is perfect shall be as his master” (6:40). We

cannot merely dress like Jesus or simply acknowledge his existence; we must become like him. And to those who make this effort and "cometh to me, and heareth my sayings, and doeth them," the Savior promises to "shew you to whom he is like" (6:47).

To reiterate this concept, Jesus closes the Sermon on the Plain with a parable of two men. The first, who actually did what Jesus asked in verse 47, is compared to a man who "dugged deep, and laid the foundation on a rock" (6:48). The image here is a beautiful one. A man became so committed to the Savior that he "dugged deep." He worked hard; he pushed himself even into the depths of his soul and heart. He was fully committed, and this commitment was demonstrated by the location of his house upon a rock. The advantage of this became clear: when faced with opposing forces—in this case a flood—the house could not be shaken.

Truly the image of Christ was engraved upon the countenance of this man. The other man, however, was not so fortunate. He heard the words of Jesus but did not follow them and "built an house upon the earth; against which the stream did beat vehemently, and immediately it fell; and the ruin of that house was great" (6:49). This latter disciple appeared to be the same as the former, but without the impenetrable foundation of the Savior his house fell *immediately*, and his ruin was *great*. Jesus understood full well what he was asking of his disciples in this sermon. This would not be an easy task. The road would be difficult and the trials lengthy, but the promised reward, becoming the "children of the Highest," would be well worth it.

MERCY IN THE REST OF LUKE'S GOSPEL

The Savior's message of mercy in the Sermon on the Plain leaves its readers with a powerful message, one intended to assist us along the pathway toward eternal life. But the message of mercy does not end with the Sermon on the Plain. Rather, a number of parables in Luke's Gospel serve to reinforce the concepts taught by the Savior in his discourse. One such parable, the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37), tells the story of a man assaulted by thieves and left for dead by all passing by, with the exception of a compassionate and merciful Samaritan. This Samaritan bound his wounds, set him upon his own beast, and secured

him rest in a local inn. The Samaritan even promised the innkeeper that he would pay the cost of the man's stay.¹⁸

Another parable that illustrates the quality of mercy, the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32), relates how a young man squanders all he has been given by his father. At some point in his life, the son realizes he has made a mistake and returns to the presence of his father. Now cognizant of his sinful state, he confesses, "I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son" (15:21). The father, in response to his son's pleas, rejoices that his "son was dead, and is alive again" (15:24) and orders that a celebration be held. Significantly, the father does not demand a repayment plan or a probationary period but mercifully accepts his repentant son immediately, and, in images reflective of the atonement, the son accepts his new role by wearing a new robe and partaking of the sacrificed calf.¹⁹

Perhaps the best evidence for the importance of mercy in the Gospel of Luke is found in Luke's unique recounting of the Atonement, the most detailed of the four Evangelists. Jesus has taught the principle of mercy. He has delivered parables to serve as examples. Now he himself will become the ultimate example. Here, at the end of his ministry, the Savior enters Gethsemane and provides his disciples an example of the purest form of mercy. He, a perfect man, will suffer for those who are imperfect, solely because he can. Upon that fateful night, Jesus "was withdrawn from them about a stone's cast, and kneeled down, and prayed, saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done. And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Luke 22:41–44). Luke's inclusion of the presence of an angel and the description of "great drops of blood" are unique to his Gospel.²⁰ Through the poignant image of the "great drops of blood," Luke dramatically emphasizes this unprecedented example of mercy, as Jesus took upon himself the sufferings of all so that we, his brothers and sisters, might have the opportunity to progress beyond this mortal sphere. In relating that an angel strengthened the Savior, Luke allows us to see the mercy of a Father concerned for the well-being of his suffering Son.

MERCY AND PERFECTION

“Mercy is of the very essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The degree to which each of us is able to extend it becomes an expression of the reality of our discipleship under Him who is our Lord and Master.”²¹ Those words, written by President Hinckley, beautifully summarize the message of the Savior in the Sermon on the Plain. One of the major purposes of Luke’s account is to show us *how* we can extend mercy—not just to our friends but to our enemies; not just to those who plead for forgiveness but to those who do not; not just to those who deserve it but to those who have done little to warrant it. Following the admonition to be merciful allows each of us to access the Atonement more fully and to receive mercy so that we may become more like the Savior, both by learning to act as he did and by becoming perfected through his grace.

NOTES

1. The relationship between the two sermons is a perplexing one. For a solid introduction to the issues involved, see Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3–7:27 and Luke 6:20–49)*, ed. Adele Yarbro Collins (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 1–88.

2. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 13:452.

3. *Oiktirein*, from which the adjective *oiktirmon* derives, means “‘to be sympathetic’ in the sense of grief and sorrow, but also in that of the sympathy which is ready to help.” While the word may be used to describe human compassion in the LXX, “in most cases the ref. is to divine compassion” (Joel 2:13 and Jonah 4:2). In the New Testament, *oiktirmon* is also used as a description of God in James 5:11, Romans 12:1, and 2 Corinthians 1:3 (Gerhard Friedrich, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967], 5:159–61).

4. Thomas A. Wayment, “The Sermon on the Plain,” in *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ: From Bethlehem Through the Sermon on the Mount*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Thomas A. Wayment (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 371.

5. In this sense, Luke’s sermon takes on a role similar to D&C 93. Luke presents a pattern for mortals to follow whereby they can become like Jesus through the development of mercy, using Jesus himself as an example. Section 93 attempts to show mortals how they can “be glorified in me as I am in the Father” through progressing “grace for grace,” just as Jesus did (93:20).

6. Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 576.

7. I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 246.

8. Hunger and poverty are often connected in OT (Psalm 107:36, 41; Isaiah 32:6–7; 58:7).

9. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1884), 24:197.

10. Although absent in Matthew, other places where series of “woes” can be found accompanying beatitudes are Isaiah 3:9–11; Ecclesiastes 10:16–17; 2 *Baruch* 10:6–7; 1 *Enoch* 94–103; 2 *Enoch* 42; 52.

11. Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 255.

12. Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 1:37.

13. *b. Shabbath* 31a.

14. Luke Timothy Johnson writes that Jesus “wants them to go *beyond* mere reciprocity into gift-giving; one is almost tempted to translate, ‘what sort of gift is that?’” Switching out “gift” for the more literal “grace” seems to render the statement most accurately (*The Gospel of Luke*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, vol. 3 of the Sacra Pagina Series [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991], 109).

15. The combination of the *ou* and *me* with the aorist passive subjunctive forms a construction known as “emphatic negation.” Jesus is not merely predicting that the disciples will not be condemned or judged, he is stating that they will absolutely not be judged or condemned.

16. The principle of reciprocity is also present in Matthew’s sermon (5:7; 6:12–15; 7:1–2).

17. The Greek participle *katertismenos*, translated here as “perfect,” literally means “to adjust,” “to restore,” or “to put in order.” As Betz observes, one who is *kater-tismenos* can also be called *teleios*, the same word used by Matthew in 5:48: “Be ye therefore *perfect*, even as your Father in Heaven is *perfect*.” With this in mind, it becomes easier to reconcile Matthew 5:48 and Luke 6:36. Matthew states the need to become “perfect” in the context of loving your enemies and blessing them that curse you. Luke merely makes explicit what Matthew implies, stating that the Father is merciful and that in becoming merciful ourselves we obtain this same perfection (see Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 624–25).

18. For a more in-depth treatment of the many similarities between the Samaritan and the Savior, see John W. Welch, “The Good Samaritan: A Type and Shadow of the Plan of Salvation,” *BYU Studies* 38, no. 2 (1999): 50–115.

19. Other parables that apply teachings from the Sermon on the Plain are the friend at midnight (Luke 11:5–8), the barren fig tree (Luke 13:6–9), the lost sheep and the lost coin (Luke 15:3–10), the unprofitable servant (Luke 17:7–10), and the Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:9–14).

20. For various reasons, these two verses are considered spurious by many Bible commentators and, depending upon which translation one is reading, are often placed in brackets or omitted completely. For a complete discussion of the issue and arguments both for and against, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*:

From Gethsemane to the Grave (Doubleday: New York, 1994), 1:180–93. The agony of the Savior is less of a problem for Latter-day Saints, however, as modern revelation has confirmed the events that Luke preserves here (see Mosiah 3:7; D&C 19:18).

21. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Blessed Are the Merciful," *Ensign*, May 1990, 68–69.