

There is a time-honored story about a man who walked into a bookstore to return a purchase. “It’s a Bible,” he said, handing it to a clerk at the cash register.

“Was it a gift?” asked the clerk. “No, I bought it for myself,” he said, “and I made a mistake. “Didn’t you like the translation?” asked the clerk. “Or the format?” “Oh no,” the man said, “the format was clear and the translation was fine. **I made a mistake.**” The clerk said, “Well, I need to write down a reason for the return.” “In that case,” said the man, **“write down that there is a lot in that book that is tough to swallow.”**

I don’t believe you will think me disrespectful if I say to you that there is a lot in the Bible that is tough to swallow.

Today’s lesson from the Gospel of Matthew may be one of the toughest of all. It is what we all know as the Beatitudes.

The well-known, 20th century theologian Paul Tillich once noted that readers and students of the New Testament often find that it is not the refined argument of Paul or the mystical wisdom of John, **but the simple sayings of Jesus, as recorded in the first 3 Gospels** which are the most difficult to interpret.

He was referring primarily to the Beatitudes.

Some of you may remember the saucy and somewhat rude British COMIC known as Monty Python who produced a movie called *Life of Brian*. One VIEW in the movie was **“what would happen if some of Jesus’ teachings had been mis-heard?”**

There is a scene which begins with Jesus on a high rock surrounded by a heavenly glow. ***It is here, we hear his words loud and clear:***

Jesus: ***“How blest are the sorrowful, for they shall find consolation. How blest are those of gentle spirit. They shall have the earth for their possession. How blest are those who hunger and thirst to see right prevail. They shall be satisfied . . .”***

Then the camera pulls back to the back of the multitude which is a long way off. An old woman shouts: ***“Speak up!”*** Her son tries to shush her. But she protests. ***“Well, I can’t hear a thing! Blessed are the what?”*** Another man tries to help: “I think it was ***“Blessed are the cheesemakers.”*** And the old woman asks, ***“What’s so special about the cheesemakers?”*** Another man interjects, ***“Well, obviously it’s not meant to be taken literally; it refers to any manufacturers of dairy products.”***

The Life of Brian portrays Jesus as a sincere teacher and leader, but it is the listeners who get it all wrong and they quarrel and squabble all through his sermon.

That is often the case, is it not? The problem is not in the teaching. The problem lies in our own hearts as we try to understand and apply Christ’s teachings.

This is All Saints’ Day, a day we honor those saints who have gone before us and whose memory is precious to us. It is no accident that these challenging words from Luke are chosen for this special day, for it is wrestling with these words that we come to understand the faith of a saint.

At first glance this passage appears to simply be Luke’s scaled down version of the Sermon on the Mount, which appears in a fuller view in Matthew 5-7. **But there are some significant differences.**

If we turn to the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 5, we read this in verses 1 and 2, ***“And seeing the multitudes, he went up on a mountain, and when he was seated his disciples came to him. Then he opened his mouth and taught them, saying . . .”***

Now look again at Luke, 17:6, ***“He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples were there and a great number of people from all over Judea . . .”***

So, in Matthew’s version Jesus goes **up to the mountain**; and in Luke, Jesus goes **down to the plain**. The location of Jesus’ teachings in the two Gospels seems to be reflected in the content. *Matthew seems to spiritualize Jesus’ message: “Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness . . .”*

In *Luke* we read simply, ***“Blessed are you who are poor . . . Blessed are you who hunger . . .”***

The teachings on the mountain are more abstract. What does it mean really ***“Blessed are the poor in spirit . . .”***?

HOW DO YOU APPLY THESE “TEACHINGS” TO YOUR EVERYDAY LIFE? *Many are unsure & confused.*

However, down in the valley, on the plain where real people live, we understand the meaning of simply being poor and being hungry.

Jesus’ teachings in Luke’s Gospel are directed at those called to be his disciples. *The word “disciple” just means “learner.”* At this point early in Jesus’ ministry, he had perhaps seventy-five to one hundred disciples who spent time regularly with him. But he needed a smaller group who would be with him constantly, in full-time training and service. So, in preparation for selecting twelve special disciples, Jesus spent all night in prayer. Wow! Have you ever prayed all night? I’m afraid that if I tried, I would fare no better than Peter, James and John who kept dozing off.

Verses 13 through 16 in Luke tell us that Jesus chose twelve to be with him constantly. We usually refer to those twelve as the disciples, but he actually designated them to be apostles. *The word “apostle” comes from the Greek “apostolos” and means “someone who is sent out.”* The first thing that strikes you about the twelve whom Jesus chose is how ordinary they were. None of them were educated, famous, or influential. **Only one, Matthew, had much money, and he had gotten it dishonestly.**

Like I said, Luke tells us that this scene was preceded by a night of prayer. Then, after this all-night prayer vigil, Jesus calls a larger group of “disciples” to him, from which he chooses twelve, designating them as his apostles. Perhaps the larger group from which the twelve were selected was the group of seventy that was sent out two by two in chapter 10. But it’s difficult to separate the selection of the twelve from Jesus’ teaching on the plain.

For example, when Jesus said, “Blessed are you who are poor . . .,” notice that he did not say, ***“Blessed are all who are poor . . .”*** Poverty is a miserable condition for most of the world’s people. We dare not justify the conditions under which many of the poor live by saying.... that Jesus said such people are somehow blessed. But a person who walks with Christ can be blessed while having none of the world’s wealth.

It is not to the bulk of humankind to whom Jesus is speaking, but to those who would be saint-like when he spoke these words on the plain.

Notice how Luke prefaces his beatitudes, ***“Looking at his disciples, he said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.”***

In other words, Christ is saying to those who most sincerely seek to follow him... “Don’t despair if things haven’t worked out for you like you had hoped financially, Don’t give up if you are hurting emotionally,

Don’t let go of my promises if you are anxious about someone you love . . . I have not forgotten you and this is not the last word on your situation. You are mine and your hunger will one day be satisfied and your weeping will one day turn to laughter. If you are rejected by your friends because of your devotion to me, take satisfaction in this . . . that is the way the world has always treated those who would go the second mile in my service.”

These are Christ's promises to those who would be his disciples. *These are the promises he makes to his SAINTS.* He is not promising us a rose garden, but if we find ourselves in a wilderness, he will help us grow roses there.

The point is that there never comes a time when all is lost for those who are committed to serving Christ. It is the one thing in life you can count on. *He will not forget you or forsake you.*

But this is not the end of Christ's message to us for All Saints' Day. **Christ continues:**

"But to you who are listening he says:

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you."

Here is that part of Christ's teachings that is tough for most people to swallow: *"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also . . ."* These teachings go against every natural human inclination. *The most natural response to hate is TO HATE IN RETURN.* The most natural response to someone who curses you is to curse them in return. The most natural response to being slapped on one side of the face (which is what the original language implies . . . more than a gentle slap) is to land a well-placed blow in return.

However, Christ is saying to us...THERE IS A MORE EXCELLENT WAY! If you love Jesus, if you want to be his disciple, if you want to be SAINT-LIKE, ask yourself how he would have responded. He is not saying to you to be a **door-mat**. He was certainly not a **door-mat** when he drove the money changers out of the temple. He was not wishy-washy when he confronted the Pharisees. **But he was always motivated by LOVE.** He never gave into his base lower nature. Even when they drove nails into his flesh, he prayed for his adversaries and forgave them.

There was a bumper sticker that appeared in the 1960s: **"Commit an unnatural act---love somebody."** It is unnatural to truly love as Jesus loved.

Let me tell you about a man named Steven McDonald, a New York City detective who was shot by a teenager named David Jones on July 12, 1986 while he was trying to stop a robbery in Central Park. The first of the three bullets that hit Steven McDonald hit him in the head, above his eye. The second hit his throat which caused him to have a speaking disability and the third shattered his spine, paralyzing him from the neck down and leaving him quadriplegic. To this day, he breathes through a breathing tube and spends much of his day in a wheelchair.

McDonald has found a new calling: visiting elementary and high schools to speak about forgiveness and nonviolence. He tells students he has forgiven his young attacker and invites them to pledge not to act aggressively or harm others. **His message did reach at least one heart.** *David Jones, his attacker, was killed just days after his release from prison. When McDonald's son Connor, then in third grade, heard the news, he asked his teacher if the class could pray for the man who had shot and paralyzed his father.*

That's not the world's way of dealing with people who have done us wrong, BUT IT IS CHRIST'S WAY. Matthew doesn't pretend that all people are capable of such love. He tells us, **"Looking at his disciples, Jesus said . . . Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you . . . Do to others as you would have them do to you."**

ARE YOU ONE OF HIS DISCIPLES??? Are you seeking to be more than a conventional Christian? Do you desire to be SAINT-LIKE, to be one of those who seek to make the kingdoms of this world the Kingdom of Christ? **ARE YOU WILLING TO FORGIVE OTHERS AS HE HAS FORGIVEN YOU???**

When Christ looks at YOU TODAY, what does he see???

AMEN.