

### The Sermon on the Plain by Robb McCoy

Luke's Sermon on the Plain and Matthew's Sermon on the Mount share many similarities. They both begin with a set of blessings - known as "The Beatitudes." Both contain quotable nonviolent ethical imperatives like "turn the other cheek", "pray for those who persecute you," "love your enemy." Matthew's sermon is known as "The Sermon on the Mount," because of Matthew 5:1, "Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up a mountain. He sat down and his disciples came to him." Luke's version is known as "The Sermon on the Plain," because of Luke 6:17 "Jesus came down from the mountain with them and stood on a large area of level ground."

There are many reasons why they chose to set this sermon in such different places. One simple explanation is that Jesus gave a similar set of teachings at two different locations. And while this is entirely plausible, there is also a theological meaning behind these locations.

The Gospel of Matthew sets up Jesus as the new Moses. The Sermon on the Mount - where people go to a high place to receive divine instruction - is simply a part of that theme that runs throughout the gospel.

The Sermon on the Plain, or more directly, "the level place," is a reminder of something else for Luke. A couple of weeks ago we read a story where people were perplexed by Jesus and asked, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" Today, as we read this sermon, we can remember Mary's song from when she visited Elizabeth (Luke 1:46-56) and be sure that this is Mary's boy.

Mary sang, "He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed" (Luke 1:52-53). Is it any wonder that Jesus would come to the level-place.

This leveling however, was about more than the location of his sermon. It is found in the major difference between the sermons, also known as "The woes." While both share very similar blessings for those society would generally consider marginalized, Luke includes 6:24-26, a list woes for those who are doing well.

*This very meme-able painting is known as "The Sermon on the Mount" by Carl Bloch (1877). Bloch was a Dutch artist influenced greatly by Rembrandt. His collection of "The Life of Jesus" paintings include many vibrant scenes like this one. Learn more at [carlbloch.org](http://carlbloch.org)*



There is a reason the Sermon on the Mount is so much more popular than the Sermon on the Plain. Visit the Vanderbilt theological digital art collection. If you search "Sermon on the Mount," you will find a dozen paintings with that name. The beautiful poetry and powerful message has captured the imagination of artists for centuries. Now search "Sermon on the Plain," and you will come up empty-handed. Is it surprising that artists (usually commissioned by wealthy patrons) avoided the story that included "How terrible for you who are rich"?

The "how terrible" however, is important. It is an important counterbalance - a leveling - to those who need to realize that unchecked wealth, unencumbered consumption, unexamined frivolity, and unearned reputation are not the way of the Kingdom of God.

The Beatitudes and Woes remind us of the dual nature of the Kingdom of God. Good news to the poor might feel like bad news to those who prosper from their exploitation. The good news of enough for all might feel like bad news for those who hoard for themselves.

The Sermon on the Plain contains a harsh truth that we would do well to receive. It may not inspire paintings, but it can push us to examine ourselves. The Beatitudes speak of both a coming reversal and a present state, and so do the woes. The Sermon on the Plain forces us to examine not only the blessing of simplicity, but heed the warnings of extravagance.

These sermons reveal the foundation of following Christ - of reversing cultural expectations, stopping cycles of violence, and ending systemic poverty. To get there, we must be willing to hear hard truths as well as beautiful blessings.