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Title: On the Level

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Scripture: [Jeremiah 17:5-10](#)

Text: [Luke 6:17-26](#)

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I am a dog lover. Some of you know that. I've talked about our grand-dog Jet in recent sermons. Prior to Jet, we had a springer spaniel named Rocky. He made it into a sermon or two as well. Neither are show dogs even though Rocky had AKC papers. But I could never imagine him being in a competition or for that matter, being

best in the show.

Neither did the owner of Burns, the long-haired dachshund, a breed that has never won the Best in Show title at the prestigious Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show. A lot of people got excited, thinking this would be the year when he won the hound group. The owner was ready to leap for joy. Alas, Best in Show went to a wire fox terrier named King, the 15th time that a wire fox terrier has taken the most coveted crown. In fact, the terrier group has dominated, fetching Best in Show a whopping 47 times in Westminster's 143-year history. People were "doggone mad" with boos and whistles when Burns was snubbed. But it wasn't about the money. There is no purse for Best in Show. No money awards for any of the dogs even though their owners layout nearly 250,000 a year in on entry fees, travel, grooming and hiring a professional handler to walk their pedigree pooch around the ring.¹ You get nothing. What a curse. Woe to you rich purebred dog owners, for you have already received your consolation.

It's just the opposite for the poor folk who have genetically confused or mixed breed animals who are---well, ugly. A couple of decades ago, to spoof the Westminster show, the Sonoma-Marin county fair in Petaluma, CA began an Ugly Dog Show. Some of the dogs that enter are so ugly, so grotesque looking that even a dog lover like me has trouble looking at them.

2018 messed up English bulldog, Zsa Zsa isn't too bad but she has a tongue that nearly drags on the ground. But the winner of the Ugly Dog Show actually gets a cash purse of \$1,500, a supersized trophy and a trip to New

York City for media appearances. What a blessing. Blessed are you poor ugly dog owners, for great is your reward and recognition.²

I've got to level with you. I don't want to be an ugly dog owner even if they are blessed. I like a nice-looking dog, even if the only consolation is, it's pretty. I don't mind the recognition when people say, "Cool dog." But I also need to level with you about where I think Jesus is on the issue. Jesus probably likes the ugly dogs better than the purebreds, like the rejects and outcasts better than the cool beautiful dogs. At least, you can make this point based upon his beatitudes because some of his blessings are for things that you or I might think aren't pretty. We may even think they are even ugly. And some of the things he curses, well, they are the things we like the most.³

This is not your usual Beatitude sermons because we aren't looking today at your usual Beatitude passage. Just about everyone is familiar with the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew says, "When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; sat down and began to teach." On that mountainside, he offers nine beatitudes.

The word "beatitude" comes from the Latin word "beatus" which means blessed, truly happy, deeply fulfilled. These nine are well known and are, for the most part, feel good blessings about the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers comes from this sermon and is so well known that it is often used in secular and political settings, although clearly not recently in politics. In the beauty pageant of the kingdom of God, these are the beautiful virtues, truly lovely blessings. They make you happy and if followed, deeply fulfilled.

But that's Matthew's sermon, not Luke's. Luke's version of the beatitudes is shorter. He has four instead of nine and he offers four parallel woes which turn the whole concept of who is blessed and who is not, upside down. And Jesus doesn't deliver this sermon from the mountainside. He comes down the mountain to a level place. According to Luke, Jesus spends the night on the mountain with a number of his disciples. He prays to God for wisdom and insight, asking for God's help in discerning who to appoint as his apostles. "And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles." (Luke 6:13) Note that there is a crowd of disciples larger than the 12, a pool of candidates from those who are following Jesus. Then,

"He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon." (Luke 6: 17) Notice, he's standing on a level place because he going to tell them the truth. This sermon is going to be on the level.

As beloved and pastoral as the Sermon on the Mount is, the Sermon on the Level is challenging maybe even a little ugly. Consider those who Jesus sees as blessed: the poor, the hungry and those who weep." This makes no sense to Western culture. Aren't these the things we strive to avoid? How many of you, six weeks ago made a New Year's resolution? I know. According to the experts, 95% of the resolutions we made are shot, no longer in effect. But how many of you resolved to be poor in 2019? How many of you said, "I'm going to go hungry?" How many of you said, "In 2019, I'm going to be sad. I'll cry a lot. That's my goal and it will make a difference. It will be a blessing" Or this:

"Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man." (Luke 6:22) That's my goal this year. I'm going to be shunned. Unpopular. A social leper. I want to be considered "one of those freaky Christians" that no one can stand to be around. An outcast, like an ugly dog; that will make me happy.

Anybody here begin the year off with that goal? I don't know about you but it pretty much grinds away at our people-pleasing, performance-driven, popularity-seeking society. It seems what culture considers as ugly, poverty, hunger, mourning, and social revulsion, Jesus thinks is a blessing.

That's bad enough. But then he adds to this sermon, four parallel woes. A woe is an affliction, a misery, a curse, and a burden. Jesus says, "Woe to those who have too much money, too much to eat, too much laughter, and too much respect from their peers." Wait a second. Is that right? It sounds downright un-American. We worship comfort. We aren't just satisfied with met needs, we want our desires met as well. We want to be rich, well fed, happy and looking good in the eyes of others and when you have those things, you aren't cursed. You are blessed. But what our culture blesses, Jesus considers ugly.

These are hard verses. Jesus sees so much unsightliness where the world sees beauty, and he finds beauty in that which we repulse and resist. The obvious question for this text is, why? Why does he love, bless, and exhort us toward seemingly ugly things?

I think there is a key. It is easily overlooked partly because the Sermon on the Mount is so fixed in our memories and partly because the clue comes in what seems to be a simply connecting phrased.

Jesus standing on the level places before the great crowd. Luke says, "They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. **Then he looked up at his disciples...**" Luke 6:18-20a)

He's not preaching to the crowd. He's talking to his disciples, his followers and he is telling them the absolute truth. He's on the level. He's being he being forthright with them and us about what is truly important. Standing in front of the "ugly dogs" of the day, the troubled and uncleaned, the sick and the infirm, the true outcasts of society, Jesus is comparing and contrasts the blessings and woes of following him. He is saying, "This is what you've signed up for."

Being a disciple of Jesus is not about spending your life chasing wealth. Woe to you if that's all you are.

Woe to you if a full belly and full bank account are the highest priorities in your life. Woe to you if your life is focused on consuming, having, hoarding. That not a life worth living! That's an affliction and a curse.

Woe to you if your goal in life is to be happy, to have fun, to be entertained and laugh. It's an impossible burden, an affliction, a curse that avoids the reality of those in need around you.

But blessed are you when you understand and embrace the poverty of Jesus, who "though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor" (2 Corinthians 8:9). In his poverty, he poured himself into those whom he loved. You are blessed when you do the same.

You are blessed when you know the deep hunger of your own heart for God and that hunger leads you to feed your hungry neighbor.

You are blessed when people criticize or hate you because of who you are and who you stand for.

You are blessed when people know that you're a Christian, not just through your words, but through your deeds.

Blessed when you stand up for the truth instead of keeping quiet and going along.

Blessed when you weep over the suffering of your friends, weep over the violence between nations, weep over the lack of welcome of strangers, and weep over the daily injustices and inequities between groups of people which has become so commonplace.

In the end, that's the point of the sermon, a challenge to his disciples to live Christ-like lives. The Beatitudes are a blessing because those who seek to live them become more like Christ: the Christ who was poor, the Christ hungered, the Christ who wept, the Christ who was hated and persecuted.⁴

Someone wise pointed out that when Jesus preached this sermon, he really was on the level. He was being very honest not just in words, but also in deed.

Jesus died penniless. Roman soldiers cast lots to divide among themselves Jesus' only possessions--the clothes on his back. And he looked at his disciples and said, blessed are you who are poor.

Jesus died hungry. There is no record that Jesus had anything to eat the day of his death. What we call The Last Supper on Thursday evening may very well have been Jesus' last meal. He died on the cross Friday at sunset with an empty stomach. Looking at his disciples he said, blessed are you who hunger now.

Jesus died weeping. After his last supper, Jesus headed for the Garden and there in that Olive Grove we call Gethsemane he prayed and he wept. He told his disciples you are blessed when you weep.

Jesus died hated. Caiaphas, the greatest religious authority in Israel called him a blasphemer. The crowds wanted a murderer freed before they would see Jesus pardoned. And his disciples deserted him. Looking at his disciples he said blessed are you when people hate and revile you on account of me.⁵

Given this, let me level with you. We are called and empowered to become more and more like Jesus, to make his priorities in this sermon, our priorities.

Woe to us who miss this message.

Blessed are we who hear it, believe it and live it.

¹ Pesce, Nicole Lyn. **People are doggone mad that this dachshund didn't win Westminster.** Retrieved 2/13/19 @<https://www.marketwatch.com/story/people-are-doggone-mad-that-this-dachshund-didn't-win-Westminster-2019-02-13>.

² <https://people.com/pets/the-ugliest-dogs-in-the-world/>

³ https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=93000312

⁴ Renninger, Michael, **Turned Upside Down** , A Sermon for Every Sunday

⁵ Blair, Brett. <https://sermons.com/sermon/christian-liberty/1346166>