

Damn preacher (Luke 6:17-26)

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [February 10, 2004](#) issue

All I know about Jesus is what I heard him say. That's all I know about almost anybody. It's not true that "deeds speak louder than words." Only words speak. The old "I'd rather see a sermon than hear one" is only partly true. Most ministerial speech these days tends to be in the affirmative mood. We pastors are, in the acerbic words of Stanley Hauerwas, a "quivering mass of availability." Give me an activity or attitude that appeals to you and I will—after some sensitive, caring, pastoral reflection—find theological justification for it.

Still, after that unpleasantness in Nazareth, with Jesus rhetorically slashing and burning through the congregation, it's good to hear him in a more affirmative mood two chapters later. The dust settles, Jesus at last gets down on our level and speaks. It is a wonderfully self-revealing moment. Jesus did not get to finish his sermon at Nazareth a few weeks ago. Now, with everyone attentive, and Jesus himself calmed down, he will no doubt lay out his program in detail.

Matthew remembers this sermon as being much longer. But despite the brevity of Luke's version, he adds four woes to the Matthean blessings—woes that negate the opening affirmations, reversing our systems of value. Those woes are a key to Jesus' homiletic.

Whereas my most "prophetic" sermons are in the imperative mood—do this, do that, you should, you ought—Jesus preaches in the indicative. The sermon is a picture of who's in and who's out in God's kingdom. I tend to begin sermons with anthropology: descriptions of what we are doing or should do, who we are or who we wish we were. I do this because I assume that most people are more interested in themselves than in God. As Luke says, the huge crowds from all over Judea came not only to "hear him" but also "to be healed," to plug into the therapeutic "power" that "came forth from him." We tend to ask not "What is God really like?" but rather, "Jesus, what have you done for me lately?" Narcissism is a hard habit to break.

Jesus is more theocentric in his preaching. A sermon is a sermon when it's about God. We learn implications for human behavior only after we learn who God is and

what God is up to.

Another thing. The discourse is eschatological. It's a vision not of present arrangements, but of what God will get when God's kingdom is come, God's will is done on earth. One doesn't hear much eschatology in my mainline denomination these days because most of us have got it so good. We're sitting on top of all this world has to offer, and we don't want to be, in Luther's words, "damned for the gospel" in order to be dragged kicking and screaming into some other world. Eschatology says that God is disruptive and dangerous before being creative. In this inauguration address, Jesus declares war, announcing an invasion related to a whole new world.

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." Jesus blesses those whom the world curses—the poor, the unemployed, the dispossessed and the oppressed. "Blessed are you hungry people, you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep. Blessed are you who are hated by others because of your love for me."

If that were all there was to Jesus' sermon that day, then we might remember it as one of the sweetest sermons ever preached. But then, true to form (Luke 4) Jesus moves from blessing to cursing.

You rich, damn you! You have already "received your consolation." You were good at working the kingdoms of this world to your advantage. Now, in God's kingdom, you shall be cursed.

For those of you who are full, stuffed with all that can be consumed in this culture, having found so many ways to satisfy your gnawing hunger, what more can God do for you? In God's coming kingdom, you shall be damned to emptiness. Wipe that smirk off your face, you drugged, self-satisfied happy ones! There's a new savior in town. Time for tears.

Damn you who are acclaimed and praised, who are asked to write articles for the Century, called to Waco to receive a gold medal for being a top-tier preacher. You carefully weigh your words, being sure never to offend anyone with the truth. That's the way the false prophets preached before you.

Jesus' sermon is a repeat of Mary's song (Luke 1:45-57.) God takes sides and loves with a love that is not impartial. If we are going to be with this God, the sermon implies, we've got to get down on God's level.

Is this anyway to preach? It's certainly not how I learned to preach. In *Not Every Spirit*, Christopher Morse demonstrates that the early Christians were persecuted not for what they believed (Jesus Christ is Lord) but for what they refused to believe (Caesar is Lord). We pastors are distinguished not only by what we graciously support, but also by what we condemn. Any homiletic that seeks to make peace with hearers cannot be faithful to the gospel. Ralph Wood pointed out that in the great Barmen Declaration of the Confessing Church in Germany, every *credimus*, "We believe . . .," is followed by a *damnatis*, "We reject . . ." Alas, when it came time for the rest of the German church to say "Nein!" it had lost the theological means to know there was even something about the world worth rejecting, as well as lost the courage to say "No!"

Carlyle Marney chided pastors for ministry that had degenerated into therapy. "You little preachers!" Marney used to say when he was my mentor. "You are always saying, 'Bless, bless, bless' when you ought to be saying, 'Damn! Damn! Damn!'"