

Scripture Readings for February 20, 2022

Isaiah 55:8-13 (NIV)

⁸ “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. ⁹ “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. ¹⁰ As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, ¹¹ so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. ¹² You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. ¹³ Instead of the thornbush will grow the juniper, and instead of briars the myrtle will grow. This will be for the LORD’s renown, for an everlasting sign, that will endure forever.

Luke 6:37-49 (NIV)

³⁷ “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. ³⁸ Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”

³⁹ He also told them this parable: “Can the blind lead the blind? Will they not both fall into a pit? ⁴⁰ The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher.

⁴¹ “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ⁴² How can you say to your brother, ‘Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

⁴³ “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. ⁴⁴ Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. ⁴⁵ A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.

⁴⁶ “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say? ⁴⁷ As for everyone who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice, I will show you what they are like. ⁴⁸ They are like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built. ⁴⁹ But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete.”

Sermon: “Wisdom for Would-be Leaders”

“Do not judge.” Really? Was Jesus serious? Does that mean that being a judge in the legal profession is an unchristian career? Surely, we all *have* to make judgements in order to make wise choices as we seek follow a moral compass. In this the Misinformation Age, how are we to discern what is reliable or factually accurate if we are not to “judge”? Doesn’t this command not make a mockery of fairness, justice, truth, wisdom, even of discovering knowledge itself? That’s the kind of nonsense that can happen if we take words out of context! Moreover, Jesus himself “judged”; Luke later reports Christ’s woes of warning and condemnation of certain Jewish religious leaders.¹ Even what Jesus says *next* in his “sermon on the plain” presupposes judging. So what is going on here?

Let’s consider the broader context: Jesus is part way through his sermon to his disciples and, as we heard last week, has told them: “love your enemies.”² Jesus then explains what that means and concludes: “Be merciful, just as your father is merciful.”³ The root of our hatred of our enemies comes from our judgemental attitudes towards them and our resultant public denunciation of those we disapprove.⁴ So, *if* we are to love our enemies, *then* we’re not to disparage others. Instead, Jesus advocates for forgiveness and generosity;⁵ in other words, “be merciful. . .” However, this command against judging is *not* indiscriminate, rather Jesus was talking about a *particular* kind of judging, one that’s results in outright condemnation of others for their faults and their failures. In the previous chapter of Luke, Jesus was dining with Levi, also known as Matthew, who was a tax collector and a newly recruited disciple.⁶ The pharisees publicly criticized Jesus’ other disciples for “eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners.”⁷ Jesus defends them: “Those who are well don’t need a physician, but those who are sick do. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”⁸ Jesus accepts the Pharisees assessment of the kind of people with whom he’s associating, but he *doesn’t* censure them. He sees those who the Pharisee’s label as “sinners” as potential recipients of divine grace and not beyond redemption and reconciliation. Moreover, Jesus demonstrates that fact by taking the initiative in reaching out to Levi and his friends and sharing a meal with them. It’s fair to say that not all would have welcomed the grace offered, but outright condemnation out of a self-righteous perspective would have been not only unhelpful and unethical but counterproductive. Those who are would-be leaders or peacemakers must *not* be quick to judge or condemn, says Jesus. And I think he has a point! But those with a superior attitude, like the pharisees and their modern equivalents, won’t like this teaching of Jesus. As we continue, let’s anticipate that we’ll be challenged!

¹ See Luke 11:37-54; see also 6:24-26.

² Luke 6:27-28; see also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Love-Your-Enemy-Really.pdf> .

³ Luke 6:36. This summarizes *how* we are to love and *why* we are to love. if we want to be part of God’s kingdom, we are to *do* the same *kinds* of things God *does*. We are to love completely, unreservedly, maturely—as does God, but *not* unwisely.

⁴ Luke 6:37a.

⁵ Luke 6:37b-38.

⁶ See Luke 5:27-32.

⁷ Luke 5:30. The Greek word used is “grumbled,” a clever OT word for the people’s grumbling at Moses in the wilderness.

⁸ Luke 5:31-32.

Jesus now goes on to speak *not* about generous grace, but simply on the principle of *fairness*. “Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you,”⁹ says Jesus to his disciples. This does *not* unravel Jesus’ earlier teaching on being merciful or of loving your enemies. Instead, he is, in my view, appealing to a common-sense truism. If we are known for *not* holding a grudge, for *not* having a judgmental spirit or a superior attitude, or – more positively - for our *kindness*, then people will be inclined to reciprocate that behavior and give us the benefit of the doubt when we mess up. But if, on the other hand, we are known for being critical, disparaging, resentful, and condemning then we naturally shouldn’t expect to receive grace and kindness in return.¹⁰ Even in the cut and thrust of a bartering marketplace, people want *fairness*, says Jesus.¹¹ No one goes to a merchant with a reputation for using false weigh scales and volume measures but will go to someone who is known for their fairness. If this minimalistic appeal to fairness is common-sense justice, says Jesus, then why not seek to win over your enemies with kindness and generosity? Jesus concludes, “For the measure you *use* will be the measure you *receive*”¹² and that’s simply another way of saying the Golden Rule, which Jesus proclaimed earlier: “Treat others in the same way that you would want them to treat you.”¹³

Jesus then continues with a series of self-explanatory proverbs concerning leadership. “Can a person who is blind guide another person who can’t see? Will not both fall into a pit?”¹⁴ This is *not* meant to disparage people with disabilities; in fact, those who are blind have amazing coping mechanisms to keep themselves safe while walking in unfamiliar territory. This proverb simply points out that leaders will simply lead you astray if they are lacking discernment to recognize reality as it truly is or are without a clear vision for the future; so *don’t* follow them.¹⁵ Jesus then says: “Students can’t do better than their teacher; when the course is finished however, they’ll all be just like the teacher.”¹⁶ Educationalists today might bristle at such language and want to talk about “co-learning,” but that’s beside the point. Moreover, as a professor, I was always encouraging my students to reach their full potential, knowing that some would eventually become smarter and *more* creative professors than me. Regardless, Jesus says to his disciples: Remember, right now you are “in training,” so learn *before* you teach. But beware of who’s your teacher, for one day you will be just like them. Therefore, be wise: if you are a student of a pharisee, you will inevitably end up a pharisee.¹⁷

⁹ Luke 6:37b-38s.

¹⁰ And in the context of leadership, if our reputation was so negative, we would *not* be regarded as a good guide or mentor, for people wouldn’t want to be associated with us let alone follow us!

¹¹ As one theologian put it: “Without justice and fairness, grace degenerates into permissiveness, just as justice without grace hardens into cruelty.”

¹² Luke 6:38b. (In a financial analogy, consider the unfairness of buying at one exchange rate and selling at another.)

¹³ Luke 6:31.

¹⁴ Luke 6:39. Recall that Jesus began his ministry by announcing recovery of sight for the blind; Luke 4:18.

¹⁵ If we have no vision for God’s kingdom, then what are we doing here?

¹⁶ Luke 6:40.

¹⁷ Jesus doesn’t actually mention pharisees here but see [1].

Jesus continues with his well-known ludicrous and hilarious example: “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own?”¹⁸ Hypocrites are often unaware of their hypocrisy!¹⁹ This speck-and-the-log reference is an oblique judgement of the pharisees with their many rules and regulations as they tried to fine-tune what it meant to follow the mosaic law to the last possible detail and, in the process, miss the key issue. They were trying to make Israel holier and holier in a way that was *separating* their nation from other nations. But the original point of the law was to make Israel God’s light *to the* nations. They were overlooking their crucial task as a role model and witness to God’s goodness and replacing that by a separatist, Jewish-first policy, which all too easily became a Jewish-only policy. Similarly, Christians can make a big fuss about the small details and miss the whole point of the gospel. We have seen an example of that this week with the resignation of the Catholic priest over a minor mistake in his use of the baptismal formula.²⁰ The point in the farcical example Jesus relates is that he knew *if* a misguided judgemental person could somehow recognize their own faults, thereby taking out the log in their own eye, *then* they would more readily accept God’s forgiveness and more likely extend grace to others.²¹ And that’s a powerful thought; let’s not forget it. We often need to pause and zoom back and see the big picture. Let’s do that for a moment by hearing N T Wright’s translation of a much-loved statement from John’s Gospel: “This is how much *God loved* the world: enough to give his only, special son, so that everyone who believes in him should *not* be lost but should share in the life of God’s new age. After all, *God didn’t send the son into the world to condemn the world*, but so that the world could be saved by him.”²²

Moving on, how will you know if the teacher or leader is worth following? That’s a great question! Jesus responds with an obvious agricultural analogy: “Each tree is known by its own fruit. No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit.”²³ A person with a *good* heart will say and do *good* things; alas, the opposite is also true.²⁴ In Matthew’s version, Jesus spells it out: “Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits.”²⁵ Actions reveal a person’s character. We *are* what we *do* no matter what we *say* we believe! *Integrity matters*. Be careful who you are following; don’t be blind, don’t be mis-led.

Jesus’ final proverb begins with a question to his followers: “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you?”²⁶ Calling Jesus by the title “Lord” in this context is to call him “my teacher.”²⁷ Consequently, having acknowledged Jesus as having that role, he asks: “Why are you *not* doing your

¹⁸ Luke 6:41-42. Psychologists call this bias projection.

¹⁹ Leo Tolstoy wrote “Everyone thinks of changing humanity, and nobody thinks of changing himself or herself.”

²⁰ See: <https://www.cnn.com/videos/tv/2022/02/15/tl-5p-father-beck-jake-tapper-live.cnn> .

²¹ Try Loyola’s *examen*: <https://www.loyolapress.com/catholic-resources/ignatian-spirituality/examen-and-ignatian-prayer/how-can-i-pray-try-the-daily-examen/> .

²² John 3:16-17, NTE.

²³ Luke 6:43-44. (cf. Jer 17:10; 21:14; Heb 6:7-8.)

²⁴ Luke 6:45.

²⁵ Matt 7:15-20.

²⁶ Luke 6:46.

²⁷ Or “master.”

homework and putting into practice what you have been taught?” As in the image of a tree and its fruit, this probing question is also about having integrity – or not. Jesus then compares putting his teachings into practice with a builder who takes the time and effort to dig deep and build on a foundation of rock. When the storms of life come, as they inevitably will, the house will stand. However, if we hear the words of Jesus and *don't* practice them, it's like a building a house with no foundation.²⁸ It's doomed collapse when life gets tough.²⁹ Not only will bad trees inevitably bear bad fruit, having no foundations will also be calamitous. We don't get to choose whether we will face severe storms in life, we only get to choose the foundation on which we stand.³⁰ Again, we *are* what we do - what we *practice*.

Imagine somebody buying a beautiful new car and putting it in the garage and leaving it there. The person refuses to put any miles on the clock at the risk of the car getting scratched; and so it sits there, out of sight, pretty but never used. That's also a parable of the way some people treat their faith. They model inactivity in the practical life of the faith while professing loudly that they are “committed” Christians. Jesus knew that it wouldn't be easy for anyone to respond to his call of discipleship. It meant a radical change of life-style. Knowing how difficult it would be, Jesus concluded this Sermon on the Plain with this warning about the *necessity of practical* discipleship.

Without doubt, just like the Sermon on the Mount, this message of Jesus was full of wisdom *and* challenge to his followers on the *meaning* of discipleship and leadership. What is *our* reaction to his message today? Are we astounded by it or dismissive of it? Let me try and briefly summarize it: Jesus *doesn't* forbid forming an opinion regarding another person's actions, but he *does* prohibit outright condemnation on the basis of such discernment because our enemies are still loved by God and could yet respond to that love and repent. Are we so keen today to fault find in others that we are blind to recognizing our own errors? Let's be aware of our own weaknesses and sin, and our need of grace. A disciple must learn from their teacher, and one who can't see needs a guide who knows the way. Ultimately integrity of character and our actions *both* matter. Only a good tree will bear good fruit. Being a good student requires more than just paying lip-service to the teacher; what we are taught *must* be put into practice. It's all sobering stuff!

Jesus is offering his followers a radical new way of living. People will, however, always try and find an alternative way; beware for that house will come down with a crash in the storms of life, says Jesus. We therefore have to ask ourselves, are we building without a foundation? Those with ears, let them hear!³¹ Amen. Let us pray.

²⁸ See also Jas 1: 22 – “Be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves . . .”

²⁹ This is not explicitly about wise and foolish builders (Matt 7:24-29), but about obedience – putting it into practice. Luke's *readers* were aware that the temple had been destroyed (AD 70). He likely saw it as God's judgment because the Jewish leaders hadn't recognized Jesus as Messiah and his divinely-authorized mission.

³⁰ How *do* we put our lives back together after a storm? Many find that it's their faith in God that gives them the strength to keep going, to have their hope renewed and to make a new beginning.

³¹ See Luke 8:8b; Matt 11:15. (See also Matt 7:28-29 for the peoples' reaction to the Sermon on the Mount.)