

REGENT COLLEGE

“THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT – A DISCIPLE’S GUIDEBOOK”

CLASS: BIBL 524

INSTRUCTOR: D. JOHNSON

BY

DAVID C. HARRIS

201264

VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA

APRIL 14, 2008

Contents

Part I: THE INTRODUCTION

1. The Beatitudes (5:1-12) – *Right-Side-Up Wisdom*
2. Salt and Light (5:13-16) – *Our Responsibility*
3. Jesus' Thesis (5:17-20) – *What He's Really Talking About*

Part II – SIX PROPOSITIONS

1. Murder (5:21-26) – *The Heart of Hatred*
2. Adultery (5:27-30) – *The Desire to Own Another*
3. Divorce (5:31-32) – *God is Within Marriage*
4. Oaths (5:33-37) – *Simple Integrity*
5. Revenge (5:38-42) – *Let It Go*
6. Enemies (5:43-48) – *A Plan of Action*

Part III – SIX INSTRUCTIONS

1. Giving as a Child of God (6:1-4)
2. Praying as a Child of God (6:5-15)
3. Fasting as a Child of God (6:16-18)
4. Thinking like a Child of God (6:19-24)
5. Resting like a Child of God (6:25-34)
6. Wisdom like a Child of God (7:1-6)

Part IV – CONCLUSION

1. Ask, Seek, Knock – He Will Answer (7:7-12)
2. The Two Gates – The Great Division (7:13-23)
3. Hearing and Doing “These sayings of mine:” Back To The Top! (7:24-27)

Part I: The Introduction

The Beatitudes – Wisdom Turned Right-Side-Up

Matthew 5:3-12

There are nine Beatitudes that begin the Sermon on the Mount. A Beatitude is a *bonus*, or a reward, given over and above the normal wage a worker is paid for doing a good job. Jesus begins his message with these nine *bonuses*, each of which His followers may look forward to with great anticipation. Take a moment and read each one slowly and carefully, noticing that the last one is longer than the rest. Also notice that each verse is a balanced pair, starting with a blessing followed by its reward. Afterward, we will look more closely at the first one – *blessed are the poor in spirit* – and throughout this book we will refer back the others, enabling us to cover them all.

*Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called sons of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil
against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in
heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.¹*

Looking then at the first Beatitude, Jesus teaches us that those who are “poor in spirit,” are blessed people. Another translation of this verse might be: “*How rewarded* are the poor in

¹ *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996). All Bible quotes are from the NIV unless otherwise specified.

spirit, because the kingdom of heaven is *for them*.” In other words, it is no small bonus to be poor in spirit, these people have a stake in the Kingdom of Heaven. If we had no other instruction from Jesus than this, we could say it was more than sufficient.

This first Beatitude is the doorway through which we enter the Sermon on the Mount, and by which we become true disciples of Christ. To understand what it means to be *poor in spirit* we must blend two ideas together in our minds: 1) poverty, and 2) the human spirit. Often we think of poverty as a lack of money, or of shelter, or food, but in the Sermon on the Mount it means even more than that. Poverty *of spirit* involves a sadly defeated feeling on the inside, even a sense of personal worthlessness, or a broken heart. If we are honest with ourselves, everyone has times in life when these types of feelings are real and very powerful, but this is exactly what Jesus is calling us to be with this Beatitude: We are to be *honest* with ourselves, about ourselves. Each person must take a painfully clear look at his or her own thoughts, motives, actions, and attitudes. The famous 12-step program would call this a “searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.”² It is this unwelcome reality that Jesus asks us to admit to as we stare at our reflections in the mirror. The fact is, without God we are entirely helpless creatures, with no idea where we came from, nor where we are going, or even who we are. The idea here, if it has not been made sufficiently clear, is one of utter spiritual bankruptcy. Nothing of value stored up inside. Consider it this way: We are born into this world as vulnerable babies, and we live our lives dependent on the merciful love of God, without which we are painfully spiritually poor. Failing to make this crucial admission at the very outset will render the rest of the Sermon on the Mount entirely frustrating to you, and will ultimately prevent you

² Hemfelt, R., and Fowler R., *Serenity, A Companion for Twelve Step Recovery*, (Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN, 1990) 38.

from allowing the words of Jesus to help change your spiritual state. Admitting we are *poor in spirit* is the initiation, and the key to the Kingdom.

The good side of this is that, despite the harsh personal state we are called to draw our attention to, the Kingdom of Heaven is yours if you do. And what a great exchange! By admitting that you have nothing to offer, you paradoxically gain the greatest gift ever, God's heavenly kingdom. Oceans of ink have been spilt in discussion of what that entails, and what Jesus means by the phrase, "Kingdom of Heaven," but for now suffice it to say that heavenly life will be worlds better than earthly life once you arrive there. For example, the final chapters of John's Revelation describe a new heaven and earth in such glowing radiance that words fail the imagination; Genesis chapters 1 and 2 describe a state of paradise wherein human beings walked and talked with God without shame, hesitation, or broken relationships; and the Gospel accounts describe the resurrection body of Jesus wherein he enjoyed all the benefits of life on earth yet somehow was unconstrained to limits of space, time, and sin. Each of these give us a glimpse at what the Kingdom of Heaven may be like. We will look further at this Kingdom as we progress, but for now, go back and notice that this same bonus is mentioned again in verse 10, as a bracket to the other Beatitudes in between. In this manner Jesus sums up all the other rewards by placing them in the context of the Kingdom of God.

Reflection: Do you understand yourself as being poor in spirit? What might stand in your way of appreciating what Jesus has to say in this first Beatitude?

Response: Devote your whole heart to God, learning to pray each Beatitude, "Dear Lord, thank you for blessing me with your words. Please help me today to participate in the Kingdom of God, by making me ..."

Salt and Light – Our Responsibility As Disciples

Matthew 5:13-16

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

In this section Jesus tells his followers, “You are the *salt* of the earth... You are the *light* of the world.” In ancient times *salt* was a commodity that many person carried around daily, usually in a small leather pouch. Apart from the obvious use of flavoring meals, there was in ancient times a *salt-covenant*, wherein two people would exchange a pinch of salt, sprinkling it into the bag of the other person as a way of saying, “This agreement may not be broken, unless we might retrieve our own individual grains of salt.” For Jesus to say that his disciples are the salt of the earth is like saying we are *key ingredients* to the recipe God is preparing.

As for *light*, God himself is associated with light throughout the entire Bible: In Genesis 1:3 the first thing God creates is beautiful light. In Psalm 18:28 David says, “You, O Lord, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light.” And 1 John 1:15 says, “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.” It is quite a high calling then for us to be described as both salt and light.

Read over the verses carefully in your Bible. To be the *salt of the earth* is to be a part of what makes living in the land taste good, and to be *the light of the world* is to be a part of what helps humanity to see its place in the universe – that we are not alone in the dark. Jesus calls us both of these, encouraging us that we have a responsibility to be what we God intends: We are to retain our distinctive flavor as disciples, and we are to shed our light so that other people will be drawn to our Father in heaven.

Reflection: Think about your daily routine, and the people you come into contact with on a regular basis. Then consider the people throughout the world who are hurting and lonely in spiritual darkness. What does it mean for you, personally, to express your spiritual ‘saltiness’ in your community? How might you shine your light more warmly into broken hearts and lives?

Response: Express your willingness in prayer to be responsible for who God made you. You have been given a great gift and a high calling as a follower of Christ, no matter what your station in life. You might pray, “Dear Lord, help me to be true and faithful to your calling. I need help being more responsible with ...”

Digging Deeper

At a linguistic level the Greek word for the expression, “lose saltiness” is *moraino* (μωραίνω). You may be able to pick up our English word “moron” in there, which carries the sad sense of stupidity, or foolishness. The idea behind the term is that a disciple of God who has become ineffective is one who is foolish.³ Jesus urges us to retain our wisdom by retaining our flavor, so as to preserve the world with the message of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus’ Thesis – What He’s Really Talking About Matthew 5:17-20

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus was a Jewish rabbi, a younger one than most. From the moment he began teaching, some people took his instruction as being personally threatening, and dangerously heretical. For this reason he makes a plain statement about his intention: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but *to fulfill* them.” Jesus wants to make it clear to his Jewish audience that what he is teaching comes directly from the

³ R.T. France, *Matthew; Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985) 112.

God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and most specifically, Moses, the Hebrew law-deliverer. It is not a repackaging or an alteration, but rather a clarification and a more deepened focus on what God has already revealed to the world through Moses at Mount Sinai. In this sense you might say that although the Sermon on the Mount deals with old subjects that were already familiar to a wide audience, the teachings of Jesus are *creative*, coming from God himself.

Read carefully over the verses again, and consider how Jesus is mindful to be extremely clear about his intentions: He does not plan a subversion of the Law, he intends to *fulfill* or *complete* it. To make sure he is perfectly clear on this, he states that, “not one *iota* (Greek: ἰῶτα) nor the smallest *dot / point* (Greek: κερᾶία) will pass away.”⁴ Also notice that he makes mention of the Kingdom of Heaven three more times in this passage, always keeping this great reward in the forefront of our minds. But those who break the commandments and teach others to do the same will be “least,” in the kingdom, while those who practice the commandments and teach others to do the same will be called “greatest” in the kingdom. Yet he tells us in verse 20 that our own righteousness, or right-standing with God, must *exceed* the most pious, devoutly religious people of his day – the Pharisees. How might we do this? The answer is simple, we can’t. As we will learn as the Sermon on the Mount unfolds, there is much more to keeping God’s law than simply practicing religion, it goes far deeper than that. James says in his epistle, “whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.”⁵ So how do we best respond? Quite simply, we learn to *mourn*.

Having already come to terms with the fact that each of us is personally *poor in spirit*, and trusting Jesus for an answer to this problem, we can now face the fact that the law of God convicts us as sinners, and in doing so the most appropriate response for us is to mourn our

⁴ Author’s paraphrase.

⁵ *New American Standard Bible : 1995 Update* (LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Jas 2:10.

spiritual poverty. But fortunately, as Jesus has promised in the Beatitudes, “*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*”⁶ One of many comforting truths we can take hold of is that, because of the cross-work Christ, we now have a destiny – the Kingdom of Heaven. No matter what we experience in this life, even in our mourning, we can trust in the living hope that Jesus gives us, namely, that even if the worst should happen to us, when we finally die out of time, we will enter a new life blessed with God’s rewards. For this reason among others, even though we cry, we do not, “mourn like those who have no hope.”⁷ Our momentarily light affliction is producing in each of us a glorious result which will far outweigh our temporary agonies in this lifetime. So we mourn, but we mourn with hope.

Reflection: Prepare your heart to listen to God’s promptings in your life today. Is there an experience, or a heavy load that makes you feel confused and without hope, wondering if God still knows about your circumstances? Confess to God any emotion you may feel, from anger and sorrow, to joy and contentment.

Response: “Loving Lord, please fill me with your Holy Spirit. I truly need your help, especially when I feel hopeless and down. Please cultivate within me ...”

Digging Deeper

The fact that Jesus references the smallest *iota* and *dot* in asserting that not one stroke from God’s Law will disappear, is fascinating in light of the complicated literary origins of the Biblical text. The Bible Jesus read was the Hebrew Old Testament, quite possibly even Greek Septuagint texts. It is presumed that Jesus and his disciples would have been familiar with Hebrew texts, but these could have been somewhat different from the standardized Masoretic Hebrew Bible which rabbis formally recognized later around 250 of our era. The Scriptures Jesus refers to, which will “by no means pass away,” had variously been copied, translated, edited, and assembled by such a wide range of scholarly hands over centuries, so as to cause

⁶ Matt 5:4.

⁷ 1 Thess 4:13, Author’s translation.

modern Bible scholars to wonder if there ever was such thing as a truly “original” version of the biblical texts! Yet Jesus makes this bold assertion, that none of God’s word will pass away, not even a pen stroke. And amazingly, despite questions surrounding the origins of the Holy Scriptures, this statement by Jesus has thus far proven to be the case, as the Bible is the most widely distributed and translated literature in the world.

Pt. 2 – Six Propositions

Pre-read: At the start of 5:21 Jesus says, “*You have heard it said...*” In your Bible, look now at the start of verses 27, 31, 33, 38, and 43. You will see a similar phrase starting off each one of these. Jesus is now responding to six mindsets which people hold regarding the Law of God, and how to live the spiritual life. We will see that in each instance Jesus proposes a better alternative, and a higher understanding.

Murder – The Heart of Hatred

Matthew 5:21-26

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell. Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

When Jesus says, “You have heard it was said to people long ago, ‘Do not murder,’” he is referring specifically to the 6th of the Ten Commandments, from Exodus 20:13, and Deuteronomy 6:17. In ancient Near Eastern society a murder was dealt with quite swiftly and

harshly: The criminal would be executed. In our modern era we are seldom witness to public executions, for reasons of decency and propriety. But in Jesus' time and place, an execution was a much more familiar sight. For this reason, the 6th commandment, "You shall not murder," would have seemed very understandable to people of that time: If a person commits murder they receive execution, an "eye for an eye." But Jesus makes things more complex by sinking the commandment far deeper into the heart of human beings. In the Sermon on the Mount, if a person is even "angry with his brother," he is subject to the same *heavenly judgment* as the murderer. This raises the standard for Christian conduct much higher than our common law. In modern society a murder trial is extraordinarily complex, involving high tech investigations and DNA samples as evidence. Imagine how much more murky are the thoughts and motives of the human heart! Yet God's piercing wisdom is able to judge even that deeply, which means that Christians should be attuned to the idea that our words and any hateful thoughts can harm other people, even to the offense of God as shocking as a physical act of violence.

Verses 22 and 23 deal with a situation wherein your 'brother' has a legitimate complaint against you. It may be tempting to use this wording as an excuse for anger and resentment, on the grounds that our 'brother' may simply be someone we are close to. But we will find in a later section of Jesus' sermon that we are to love even those who we do not consider our brothers (5:34-48). So there is no excuse or loophole, and in fact, by proclaiming this Jesus has made the 6th commandment far more rigid.

Notice he urges us to *reconcile* with people as quickly as possible, so that any disunity won't grow chaotic and filled with even more painful animosity over time, and also that our own relation with God will be harmonious as well.

Reflection: Have you been harmed by someone and need God’s healing help? Have you done somebody wrong and felt a weight of remorse on your heart? No matter what your situation in life, God can bring his restoration and heal your hurting mind through the cross-work of Christ. His death provides a place for you to go and ask for help with the burdens that are too heavy for you to carry on your own.

Response: “Dear Lord, I admit that I am a part of a broken world, that I am part of the problem, and that sometimes I hold onto resentment inside. I need your help, your healing, and forgiveness. Please penetrate my heart and reveal to me those areas I need to offer to you today. Send your healing Spirit, and show me ...”

Digging Deeper

Notice that three times Jesus uses the phrases “*will be*” in referencing judgment, or “the fire of hell.” This is an accurate translation of the Greek verbs underneath the English rendering, as they are all in the *future tense*. In this sense we may safely conclude that Jesus is eluding to an eschatological Day of Judgment as described in earlier prophetic texts, wherein God will, in one singular act, both reward his people and punish his enemies at the onset of the Kingdom of Heaven. The punishment is here embodied in the Greek word *Gehenna* (γέεννα), a Hellenized transliteration of the Hebrew ‘Hinnom Valley.’⁸ This was a specific geographical location in Jerusalem, and would conjure in the minds of Jewish people the image of a stinking trash heap on the outskirts of town, burning away the dump that is being continually piled onto it.

Adultery – The Desire to Own Another Matthew 5:27-30

You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

Similar to the previous proposition regarding murder, where we learned about resentment inside the heart, Jesus keeps the focus on our motives and thought life. This time he is

⁸ J. Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains : Greek New Testament*, electronic ed. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

referencing the 7th Commandment, “You shall not commit adultery,” along with the 10th, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife...”⁹ But once again the idea is the same: If you have longed to do something in your heart, you have in essence done that very act in ‘real’ life, if only in a spiritual sense. At this point, however, it may become easy for us to rationalize: “Yes, I have done some of these things in my heart, but nobody has ever been hurt by that, so why should it be a problem?” And as if this were exactly what Jesus anticipated we might think, he includes two very dire measures which he says may help prevent our ending up in hell.¹⁰ First, pluck out the sinful eye, followed by the right hand.

It must be stated that these violent actions are not to be taken literally, but that Jesus is speaking hyperbolically, for the sake of impressing on our minds just how important the spiritual realm is. Our concrete actions in this life have some impact on the Kingdom of Heaven, or at least how we will figure into it, and our heart motives feed directly into the things we do. So despite the notion that the seemingly insignificant choices of a single human being count for nothing in the big picture, the exact opposite is true. Consider what King David’s first quick glance at Bathsheba lead to, and how things might have happened differently if he had averted his gaze. We will never know the possibility, but we do know that adultery, when it comes to light, leads to public *scandal*. Families are shattered, jobs are lost, and hearts are broken when adultery is committed. For this reason Jesus wants us to take drastic steps to avoid it, starting with the longing of the heart.

Reflection: You probably know somebody who has been directly affected by adultery, perhaps even yourself. Maybe you feel regret over your own actions of the past, and have caused others pain, or maybe you have been the victim of an adulterous affair. God can renew areas of our lives that are ruined, even if we cannot change the past, and he can cause new growth in those places where poisonous seeds have been planted.

⁹ Exod 20:14; Deut 5:18.

¹⁰ For a literary note on “hell” see previous Digging Deeper section.

Response: “Dear Lord, adultery and lust has wreaked havoc on so many people’s lives and marriages. Please send your healing touch where it is so desperately needed, and help me to let you into this area of my own life by ...”

Digging Deeper

The Greek word for “offend” seen twice in this passage is *scandalizo* (Gk: σκανδαλίζω). You can hear where we get our English word “scandalize.” In the original context *scandalizo* has to do with setting traps for an enemy, and the New Testament further enhances the meaning to associate it with a “stumbling block.”¹¹ But while our current understanding of a scandal can apply to any number of scenarios, the older English meaning was much closer to the biblical sense, in that it applied to any “unseemly conduct of a religious person that discredits religion or causes moral lapse in another.”¹² This definition perhaps gets closest to what Jesus had in mind when he warned us against covetous affairs of the heart, and underscores the importance of Christian integrity.

Divorce – God is Within Marriage

Matthew 5:31-32

It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

As mentioned previously, adultery brings destruction into any marriage. Quite often divorce is the outcome, and very few people would be quick to forgive an adulterous spouse. For this reason Jesus places marriage on the highest level of sanctity before God. Marriage was ordained by God, so it is more than a legal contract, it is a holy covenant. Except in the case of adultery, Jesus gives no clear legitimate reason for seeking a divorce. However, the issue is more complex than this, even within the Biblical texts. For a more complete picture of what the

¹¹ G. Kittel, G. Friedrich, and G.W. Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Translation of: Theologisches Worterbuch Zum Neuen Testament, electronic ed., (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995).

¹² *Webster’s New World Dictionary, Third College Edition*, (Cleveland, OH: 1988).

Bible has to say about divorce, in conjunction with these verses here, we must take into account others passages that cast a different nuance on the matter.¹³ Suffice it to say, each person must come to his or her own understanding of what God calls for within a given relational situation, and this demands godly *wisdom*. We will talk more specifically about godly wisdom in another section, but the important idea here is, God's *ideal* is for a couple to marry and remain together, that is the heart of God. Any disciple of Christ would want to please the heart of God, and when a marriage falls apart – which happens all too often in the world – God grieves just as we do.

A large part of what drives couples apart is misunderstanding and fear. When these things take hold of a marriage, either from the inside or outside, the husband and wife can begin to feel like enemies of one another. No one enjoys when this occurs, accept perhaps Satan, the enemy of God's covenants and of every marriage. Therefore, staying within the confines of the Sermon on the Mount, we may now apply another of the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."¹⁴

Every marriage, if it is to thrive and grow, requires both partners to be *peacemakers*. Being a peacemaker is a pro-active stance that involves making actual effort to sustain the marital bond of love and commitment, even when things seem bleak. Quite often, if a couple feels worn out and is going through hard times, just a little more willingness to hang in there and wait on God can turn things around over time, and a couple may look back years later and be very grateful for having stuck beside one other during those harder times. But this is not the case in every situation. Every marriage, even the very best ones, ultimately do end on a hard final note when one or both partners pass away, and not every marriage can survive something as

¹³ For a more complete biblical picture of divorce and remarriage, the reader should consult also Deut 24:1-4, Mal 2:16, Matt 19:9, Luke 16:18, and 1 Cor 7:10-16.

¹⁴ Matt 5:9.

painful as an act of adultery, which destroys trust. But peace can be made through forgiveness, and what may look like a hopeless situation can be transformed for God's glory and our benefit.

Reflection: Are you and your spouse having marital difficulty? Are things harder than you ever thought they would be? Begin to pray specifically for godly wisdom in as to how your Heavenly Father would want you to honor the covenant of marriage. Trust the Lord, that he has a plan for your life, and no matter what happens he will always be with you, in every situation. Even if you feel small and insignificant, God is aware and cares how you treat others, and how you are treated.

Response: "Loving Lord, you understand what we all go through in this life, and nothing escapes your caring eye. Please walk with me now, and help me begin to come to terms with ..."

Digging Deeper

The description of people as "peace-makers" appears only one time in the New Testament, here in Matthew 5:9 in the Sermon on the Mount. The word represents the inclination on the part of early Christians to combine certain terms into new ones, in order to describe new ideas which fit the Gospel message. The Greek word from which *peace-makers* comes from is "eireno-poios" (εἰρηνο-ποιός), which simply combines "peace" and "making / doing" into one idea. Behind the Greek word for *peace* lays the Hebrew word "shalom," which, according to grammarians, may be described in part as the "portion of the righteous, and the sum of messianic blessing."¹⁵ Truly a marvelous gift from God with profound connotations, *shalom* may be applied either to nations or individuals. Either way, the idea Jesus describes is one of *making*, or more thought provokingly, *doing* shalom. Those who *do* (ie., create, promote, support, and sustain) shalom, in marriages and in relationships in general, will be called children of God.

¹⁵G. Kittel, G. Friedrich, and G.W. Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Translation of: Theologisches Worterbuch Zum Neuen Testament, electronic ed., (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995).

Oaths – Simple Integrity

Matthew 5:33-37

Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.’ But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

Jesus here incorporates the 3rd Commandment, “You shall not misuse the name of the Lord.” The name of the Lord is holy, special, and important enough to hold in the highest reverence. God told Moses at the burning bush, “Tell them ‘I AM’ has sent you.”¹⁶ In revealing his own Name, God has given humanity something very precious, as an insight into the character of God himself: He is ever existent, un-created, and eternal. He has also allowed people to know him more personally, and this has always been God’s desire, that we would know him. Jesus himself is a reflection of that desire.

Imagine then what it feels like to hear your name spoken in constant derision. Maybe you have known someone who complained about you by name, on a regular basis, within your hearing. Nobody likes to hear their own name spat out with disgust, and God shares these feelings too. It may be unsettling to think that we, mere human beings, can influence the emotional life of God, but in truth we have a heavenly Father who possesses the full range of emotions which he invests into us. So taking his name in vain is at once very hurtful. At the same time, swearing an oath by the name of God implies a certain cavalier attitude toward not only God’s holy name, but also toward the integrity of our words. If we must swear in order for our word to be believed, what does that say about the substance of our actions? In other words, those who let their yes or no stand, and live by their word, have no need to swear oaths, or to convince anyone of their integrity; they have a proven track record.

¹⁶ Ex 3:14.

Note that Jesus describes heaven as God’s throne, and earth as his footstool. Also notice that, “anything beyond this (a simple yes or no) is from *the evil one*.” These references point to the reality that, once again, our words carry weight in the spiritual realm, which is just as meaningful as the visible world around us. Our conduct may not directly harm anyone, but the words, thoughts, motives, and attitudes of our hearts have spiritual impact even beyond the physical world, which God himself owns like a person might own a footstool.

Reflection: Have you ever considered that your own daily decisions, even your words, have heavenly consequences? When you think about the Kingdom of Heaven, does it seem real or unreal most of the time? Take a few moments to ponder the reality that there is a spiritual realm all around us that is unseen. Allow God to comfort your heart, he is in control of his universe.

Response: “Heavenly Lord, I pray now that you would be glorified here on earth, in my every word. Please, dwell inside of me, and make my heart more attuned to your heart, so that I might reflect your integrity by ...”

Digging Deeper

As with previous sections it may be important to note that here Jesus is possibly using hyperbole to get his point across. As we have seen, the Name of God is sacred, never to be taken lightly. But what about swearing an oath in a modern day law of court? There are a number of Christians who take this instruction literally, as a “blanket prohibition,” and refrain from swearing oaths, such as certain Anabaptists and Amish people.¹⁷ But this is for you to come to terms with personally. Part of walking with Christ involves balancing what Jesus said long ago with what our modern society presents, and each of believer must wisely decide where he or she stands.

Revenge – Letting It All Go

Matthew 5:38-42

You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

¹⁷ W.D. Davies, and D.C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, (Edinburgh, U.K., T & T Clark Ltd., 1988), 535.

And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

When the expression “eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth” is quoted in our time, usually it is followed by the (misguided) notion that living in such a way will leave everyone “blind and toothless.” But this reflects an over-simplification, as there is more to the expression than this. In three places – Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, and Deuteronomy 19:21 – the phrase is used as a guideline for exacting justice. For example, Leviticus 24:19 states that, “If anyone injures his neighbor, whatever he has done must be done to him.”¹⁸ The direct equivalent to a given crime was to be returned onto the perpetrator, eye for an eye, tooth for tooth, wound for wound, burn for burn. But the justice system was, under no circumstances, to go overboard, taking an eye for a tooth, for example. This was meant not only to provide penalties for lawbreaking, but also for restrictions on the governing authorities, leaving ultimate justice (and vengeance) in the hands of God. The principle is called *limited retribution*, and it was found also in the Babylonian code of Hammurabi (circa 1792 – 1750 BC).

But Jesus also says here, “do not *resist (stand against)* an evil person.” Is this to be taken as meaning passive non-resistance when we have been wronged? Not quite. To be sure, the examples Jesus gives – turning the other cheek, and walking the extra mile – do indeed instruct his followers to be willing to suffer persecution and abuse. This is simply part and parcel of being a Christian disciple. But *not resisting an evil person* is different from allowing evil to run rampant. Paul, in Romans 12:17 draws out the idea further, saying, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil.” What Jesus is instructing then, is not a setting aside of justice, but setting aside the philosophy of fighting fire with fire, or, in this case, fighting evil with more evil. Paul says in

¹⁸Lev 24:19.

the same section of Romans, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”¹⁹ This is the higher path a Christian is called to walk on, and we will see Jesus take this idea even further in the next, and last, of the six propositions.

Reflection: Can you recall a time when you got back at somebody simply because your pride was hurt? Do you have regrets for anything you did in your past which today seem petty, childish, and even hurtful? Confess these things to God and allow him to minister to your feelings of conviction and guilt.

Response: “Mighty God, you alone are just and right. Please forgive me for standing over other people in a place that was never mine to occupy. Help me to let go of my own desires to get back at people, and change my ...”

Digging Deeper

Two Beatitudes Jesus provides deal specifically with persecution. They read as follows:

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”²⁰

Ignatius, bishop of Antioch (d. circa 107 C.E.), understood persecution like few Christians do. During a time when disciples of Christ were in hot expectation of the second coming of Jesus, and when martyrdom in the Roman Coliseum was a common occurrence, Ignatius boldly wrote to his friend Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, “Where there is much pain, there is much gain.”²¹ He embraced persecution, knowing that his faithfulness would count for something more in the big picture. Ignatius is but one example of many who have laid their lives down for their faith, but those who suffer persecution for Christ have a reason to rejoice, as Jesus says, “your reward is great in heaven.”

¹⁹ Rom 12:21.

²⁰ Matt 5:10-12.

²¹ M.W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers; Greek Texts and English Translations*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 195. Author’s translation from the Holmes’ text.

Enemies – A Plan of Action

Matthew 5:43-48

You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

In this sixth proposition Jesus tells us to love, and pray for, our enemies. To what end?

“That we may be sons of our Father in heaven.” This is an echo of reward from the Beatitudes, and it stands as a radically different way of living life, running against the grain of nearly every human impulse for retribution. But there is a crucial difference between what Jesus is saying here and what he said about being children of God previously in the Beatitudes: In this passage Jesus directly connects being a child of God with love for enemies. Verse 45 starts with, “*So that you may become children of God,*” giving us every reason to conclude that becoming God’s children is at least partially *caused by* loving our enemies.

Christ himself had enemies, and whether we are aware of it or not, so do we as his followers. We have enemies in the spiritual realm, and earthly enemies who harbor simple hatred for Christians. But the disciples of Jesus are called to act differently than the rest of the world. Jesus points out that tax collectors, considered the lowest traitors by all the Jewish people of his day, even they were capable of loving those who loved them and hating their enemies. Jesus poses the question, “what is so special about that?”²² If we are to walk with Christ as true disciples, we must learn to leave retribution with God, and be willing to take less than what we feel we deserve, being assured that nothing escapes God’s watchful eye, and that he will settle all accounts on the day his Kingdom is fully realized.

²² F.D. Bruner, *Matthew, A Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 266.

Reflection: Are there people in your life who you would like to see pay a price? Have you admitted this to God, asking for his forgiveness? If you are having trouble forgiving someone, ask God to make your heart more willing to do so, being willing to let him work deeply in your soul.

Response: “My God and Savior, you are the one who protects my life, and you are tending to my needs. Please cultivate in me a willingness to turn the other cheek, and to show the same heart toward people who have wronged me as you did on the cross. I pray right now for ...”

Digging Deeper

The real key to understanding and living out this passage is to appreciate the inner character of God. In Exodus 34:5 God describes himself as, “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in loving kindness and truth.”²³ God is merciful, yet he will “by no means leave the guilty unpunished.”²⁴ In other words, God does not gain any pleasure out of having to take vengeance. He would sooner have people treat each other in accordance with his character, so there would be no need for avenging sin. So if his heart is for compassionate mercy, our hearts should reflect that same desire. That is why Jesus says in the Beatitudes, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”²⁵ God will show mercy to those who do the same, because merciful people have learned to act like their Creator, and allow God to have the final word in every situation, even to the point of loving the unlovable, just like he does.

Pt. III – Six Instructions

Giving as a Child of God

Matthew 6:1-4

Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is

²³ *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update*, (LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995).

²⁴ *Ibid.* Ex 34:7.

²⁵ NIV, Matt. 5:7

doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Entering chapter six, this first instruction, following on the heels of the propositions, gives us *guidelines for giving*. It starts with a warning, “Be careful.” This warning is tied to the secrecy of being watched by God. There is, unseen by human eyes, something of an anonymous society of secret givers in this world, and the disciples of Jesus are called to head up its organization. It is assumed by Jesus that his followers will voluntarily give to others, as he uses the phrase, “*when you give to the needy,*” but he wants to make clear to us that our reward comes not simply from the act of giving itself, but also from the motive of our hearts. Quite simply, instead of seeking public recognition, we should be imitating Jesus, quietly giving out of the sense that it is the right and best thing to do. In doing so, we will be reflecting our desire for the hungry to be fed, for those who are hurting to be healed, and for the oppressed to be freed. In short, we are to hunger and thirst for righteousness, rather than for fame. God sees these acts done in secret, and will reward them in the kingdom: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, *for they will be filled.*”²⁶

Reflection: Has your demeanor gotten in the way of your giving at times? When was the last time you actively sought out a place of need, so that you could fill it? Maybe God is calling you to do that for the first time in your life today.

Response: “Merciful Father, there is no way one person can meet all the needs of the world, but you did. You gave everything of yourself, holding nothing back, so that we could be restored to fellowship with you. Now help me today to give of myself by ...”

Digging Deeper

In our day acts of charity are desperately needed. For some reason, people only seem to act in an emergency, or when it directly touches them personally, but this is not how God’s people were called to be. People who regularly give from the heart in order to help others, stand

²⁶ Matt. 5:6.

in the company of heroes who would rush into a burning building to save a child. Deuteronomy 15:11 says, “For the needy will never cease to be in your land, therefore I command you, ‘You shall freely open your hand to your brother.’”²⁷

Praying as a Child of God

Matthew 6:5-15

And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This, then, is how you should pray...”

As with the acts of charity prior, Jesus calls us to a humble and quiet prayer life as well. Again, joining the society of secret but adamant prayers will benefit us in the Kingdom of God. But Jesus also teaches us *how* to pray, not leaving us without an example. He gives a wonderful model that we can follow, and expand upon. Let’s look and learn.

1. “*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.*” Begin with the recognition of God’s holiness. Acknowledge God’s name, and praise him to start with. God is not insecure, that he needs to be reminded of his holiness, but he must be approached with honor and respect. He is your loving Father in heaven, but he is also the King of the kingdom. How amazing that you can feely pour your heart out to the King of Heaven, because he is also your heavenly Father!
2. “*Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*” Express your desire to see God’s kingdom come alive in your heart, and around the world. He is in control of the heavens and the earth, and you are a part of his kingdom plan. What would the world look like if God’s heavenly kingdom were to be

²⁷ Author’s paraphrase, based on 1995 NASB.

entirely realized here on earth? Someday the kingdom will break in with all of its glory. Pray for that to happen!

3. *“Give us today our daily bread.”* Ask God to meet your needs. He knows what they are, but part of your relationship with him is spending time together. So let God know what you need, even the small things, and trust him. Whether we are aware of it or not, God has a much greater idea for meeting our needs than we do. You can rest in his daily provision.
4. *“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”* This request asks God to treat us fairly, but that we would be shown mercy. Ask God to forgive you, but also ask him to help you forgive others as well. Ask God to perfect your forgiveness. He gives a warning in verses 14-15, saying, “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” Do not be afraid to name specific people and sins in your confession to God. He can handle any prayer we can pray, no matter what our emotions or words may be.
5. *“And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”* Be aware, as you come to a close in your prayer time, that there is a spiritual realm all around you that is filled not only with God’s goodness, but also with enemies. This is important to Jesus, as he prepares his disciples for the Kingdom of God. We are still in a spiritual battle, even in our quiet times of devotional prayer.

Digging Deeper

There is a short doxology added to the Lord’s prayer, which says, “For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.” Scholars are in agreement that this is a

tagline added by the worshipping community perhaps as a way to soften the abrupt and even shocking ending to the prayer.²⁸ Most people recite this doxology out of habit. But try on occasion praying without it, ending instead with a sharp awareness of the reality of spiritual warfare. You may find that this heightens your sense of the inevitability of the Kingdom of God.

Fasting as a Child of God

Matthew 6:16-18

When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

In this passage Jesus gives us guidelines for fasting, which was a regular part of Jewish religious life, and has benefits still if done safely and for the right reasons. Notice that for a third time, Jesus makes it a point to distinguish between what his followers do, and what “hypocrites” do. Maybe you have started to sense the theme by now, but Jesus is impressing on us just how important it is to be genuine in our faith, rather than simply putting on a performance for the approval of God and man. God looks on the heart, and knows why we act the way we do. So fasting, along with other spiritual disciplines such as prayer, silence, Bible reading, and charity, all need to be done with a true desire to become closer to God, not as a means of putting ourselves on a pedestal.

On a literary level there is a word play in the text between the expression “disfigure” (ἀφανίζω), which literally means to make disappear, and the word “unseen” (φαίνω). Matthew’s gospel uses these words intentionally to convey the idea that, in the eyes of Jesus, those who

²⁸ C.S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 225.

make a spectacle of themselves for the sake of being seen are ironically invisible to God.²⁹ By looking on the heart, the Lord takes our spiritual temperature; he gauges the health of our souls by examining what man cannot see. This is a big part of understanding the kingdom of God: “*We look at that which is unseen, for that which is seen is temporal, but that which is unseen is eternal.*”³⁰ So when we fast, or do anything at all having to do with the faith walk, our outer demeanor reflects the inner seriousness we have for the reward which God offers. To put it another way, those who actively flaunt their spirituality are not really acting spiritual at all, but those who hold themselves with a quiet poise and grace, as they go about kingdom business, are able to engage in sincere and rewarding ministry, which God blesses.

Reflection: Do you sometimes struggle with fitting in at church, as if everyone else knows how to be holy, but you are lonely and hurting inside? You are not alone, and God is not concerned with exhibition. If you come to God with the heart of a child, wanting to be close to your Heavenly Father, he will more than hear your prayer.

Response: “Dear God, sometimes I get caught up in the need to look a certain way, and I’m sorry. I simply want to be at peace with you, so I come to you with my hands wide open. Please take away...”

Digging Deeper

Perhaps by now you may be feeling that there are too many lofty ideals here that you simply cannot live up to, no matter how much you do: Giving, prayer, fasting, etc. But the real focus of each of these is the condition of your *inner person*. From this point on, until the end of the discourse, Jesus will turn his focus directly toward issues dealing with the inner person, where God does his deepest work in our lives, and where we can learn to work along side him, submitting ourselves to his kingdom agenda. One aspect to examine in light of these instructions is our own life’s consistency, as we allow God to show us areas of personal hypocrisy. If you

²⁹ J. Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew; A Commentary on the Greek Text, New International Greek Testament Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005) 295.

³⁰ 2 Cor 4:18.

are a different person at church than you are elsewhere, then there needs to be some correction in your life.

Thinking like a Child of God
Matthew 6:19-24

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness! No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

Here Jesus is getting us to straighten out our ultimate priority. By now we know the ethics of the Kingdom of God, and we should also know that they are vastly different from the values of the world. We should also know that the kingdom is far more valuable than anything this brief life has to offer. For that reason Jesus rightfully calls us to make a decisive choice between heaven and earth. Earth, he says, will be destroyed and devoured, whereas heaven will be safe and permanent. There is no comparison. Nothing on earth can buy the Kingdom of Heaven, and money can even distract you from it, causing you to serve *things*, instead of God. Proverbs 11:4 puts it very succinctly, “Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death.”

Notice also, that Jesus uses very strong words in this passage to describe our loyalties: Love and hate. It is important to note that he is not describing a situation wherein a person has two masters and therefore a conflict of double love. Rather the issue is simply being in love with one while the other becomes entirely despised.³¹ This may seem shocking, but a passionate love for money and goods can cause us to hate the things of God. This is why hypocrisy has no place

³¹ Nolland, 303.

in the heart of a disciple of Christ, and why the sixth Beatitude reads: “*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*” The pure heart is devoted to only one Master.

Reflection: We all need earthly things to survive. Even in the prayer Jesus taught we were shown to ask for “daily bread.” What is the difference between *need* and *greed*? Have you ever felt as if all the *things* in your life are more of a clutter and hassle than they are worth? Allow God to loosen your grip on those things which may prevent you from embracing the Kingdom of God.

Response: “Mighty God, please open my eyes to your invisible workings. Help me see the wonder world all around me, so that I am not entranced by all the things a person can possess. As of right now I let go of ...”

Digging Deeper

It was presumed, back in ancient times, that *the human eye* was actually something of a light source in itself.³² In essence, what Jesus is saying then is, light, a symbol of the presence of God, enters a person from the outside, then fills the body and shines from the inside out. Sort of like a solar panel that stores power from the rays of the sun. But if the ‘light’ that you allow to shine throughout your life is actually from a dark source – such as the earthly things which distract us from the Kingdom of God – then our entire vision of life will be just as dark and godless.

Trusting like a Child of God

Matthew 6:25-34

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given

³² *Ibid.* 300.

to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

The faith walk involves not knowing what will happen next. If you look around and worry about every potential pitfall in life, you will only succeed in making yourself crazy. Jesus has assuring words for us when we are afraid: Have faith! Just a little trust in God goes a long way, and those who seek the Kingdom of God will be well taken care of.

Notice that Jesus uses very universal examples; who isn't familiar with flowers? Or grass? Because Jesus uses natural images, common to everybody in all times, the application and message holds its relevance for us today. The same loving care God gave to flowers back then, is the same today, and can be applied to all of God's creation including yourself. Contrary to the idea that says we are alone in the universe, that we are merely cosmic accidents hurtling through a vast empty space, God is fully attentive to our every experience in life. We may feel small at times, but we have eternal significance to the Creator, and so we are not left to fend for ourselves. These are very comforting words from our Lord, who wanted us to know that God is still very much alive and well, and seated on the throne watching over his children.

Reflection: If you struggle with fear and worry, take comfort in the fact that Jesus instructs us to pray for our daily bread. Don't be shy or timid before God, feeling as if you are not worth his time or attention. Learn to approach God in prayer as your friend, your comfort, your security, and your help. There will come a day when you will look at God face-to-face, and if you cultivate your relationship with him now, you will feel a great sense of relief when you find that your Creator is someone very familiar to you already.

Response: "Loving Heavenly Father, I worry sometimes, quite a bit. And I know you are looking after me, but there are times when I don't trust you like I should. Please help me to grow in faith, and to stand firm in your strength. Today, for my 'daily bread,' I need help with ..."

Digging Deeper

The contrast Jesus draws between his disciples – at that time Jews exclusively – and “pagans” is very typical of Jewish *wisdom* tradition.³³ Throughout wisdom writings there is a sharp division between the faithful children of God, and the rest of the unbelieving world. We will consider wisdom itself more closely in the next section, but in this text we can see in the clear separation between the two, in that pagans go running after things which God’s people can simply trust him to provide. In a certain sense it may be said that God sees everything as either holy, or unholy, but the irony is, as we saw in 5:45, God “sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” So while the unbelieving world may chase after all these things which God knows we need, they quite simply do not have to, and doing so only wearies a person out. It is always best to trust in God.

Wisdom like a Child of God

Matthew 7:1-6

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. 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? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye. Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces.

This passage presents two pictures: 1) The picture of a person who helps his brother by removing the speck from his eye, and 2) the person who tries to help out by casting pearls to pigs, only to be torn to pieces in the end. Scholars and theologians often treat these two images separately, making sure to underscore the fact that Jesus is warning us not to stand in the place of judgment and condemnation over other people, seeing ourselves as superior to others. But once

³³ M. Black, ed., *Peake’s Commentary on the Bible*, (London, UK: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1972), 779.

we actually step into a real life situation with a person, how should we go about helping rather than harming? It's not always an easy call, as these two pictures illustrate.

On one hand, you may not have the necessary objective point of view to be able to help a person, because you may be in worse shape yourself, and entirely unaware of your own log-eye. In other words, the more consistent your life is with your faith, the more credibility you may have when you step in to lead someone to a better place. But on the other hand, even if you are in a great position to help someone, you just may be “throwing your pearls to pigs.” This is a harsh image for Jesus to use, especially as pigs were (and are) considered unclean animals to Jewish people. So even though you may have exactly what that person needs, even though you may have something priceless that will benefit and bless their whole life, that person may still not hear it. In fact, they may be hostile to you for trying to help them. Such is the sad reality of living in a fallen world.

So the question still remains: Which should I do? If I am in a good place to help someone see the truths of God, should I pull the speck out of their eye, so long as there's none in mine? Or would it be best to save my pearls, and not risk being torn to pieces by ungrateful people? There is no clear and simple answer, no one-size-fits-all. This is where godly wisdom comes in. In every situation you must learn to discern, to see through what is happening, so that you can proceed with insight. This is not always easy, and as we learned in the last section, the faith-walk involves not knowing what will happen in the future! But things like prayer, Bible study, devotion to God, all of these will help harmonize your thoughts and emotions to the mind and heart of God.

Reflection: Have you ever tried to help someone, only to find out that you were not in the best position to help out? Or have you ever met someone who was ungrateful, and would rather stay in the mud than take a helping hand? The wisdom of God is more precious than rubies.

Response: “My God, I know you have a better perspective than I do, and I know you can see the inside of a person when I cannot. I ask you today to give me wisdom in the area of...”

Digging Deeper

Scholars and theologians have long debated the issue as to exactly what wisdom literature is. Perhaps the best way to get an appreciation for biblical wisdom is to ponder it. Below are two verses from the book of Proverbs, which, appropriately, follow one right after the other. Read them both very carefully and consider, which one is correct:

“Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself.”
(Proverbs 26:4)

“Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes.”
(Proverbs 26:5)

The idea here is that no one action is right in every situation. Just like the examples Jesus gave with the speck of dust and the pearls thrown to swine, there is never a one-size-fits-all solution to every problem in life. Sometimes it is good to answer a fool according to his folly, other times not. But the one thing we *can* rely on consistently is the faithfulness of God, so even though different life situations call for different expressions of wisdom, we should continually look to God and ask him to help us get through.

Conclusion

Ask, Seek, Knock – God Will Answer
Matthew 7:7-12

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

In these verses Jesus paints a picture of his followers *pursuing* God.³⁴ There are three verbs – ask, seek, and knock – all three are active in form, and all three are imperative commands. Jesus here makes it abundantly clear that God’s people are to make it their life’s quest to pursue God. This takes Jesus’ message beyond merely asking for daily bread, but calls us to be highly proactive in our spiritual growth. Also, along with our asking, seeking, and knocking on the door of Heaven, we are to *do* the Golden Rule.

In verse 12 Jesus summarizes the guiding principle of God’s law handed down from Mount Sinai: Do to others what you would have them do to you. This saying is something of an echo of Leviticus 19:18, which instructs each person to “love your neighbor as yourself.” This Golden Rule is found in many societies, as well as many world religions, including Zoroastrianism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and ancient Indian beliefs.³⁵ But what makes the biblical command compelling, is that it is presented as a call to positive action, rather than to abstinence from harming others. In other words, many hold the Golden Rule as being, “*not* doing to others what you would *not* want them doing to you.” In this sense it reads as a restrictive command. But Jesus, and Leviticus, are proactive. We are to actively *love* our neighbor as ourselves, and we are to *do* to / for others what we would want done for us in return. Jesus places the obligation on the believer to step out in faith for the cause of the kingdom. There is no room for inactivity as a disciple of Christ, we must do our part.

Reflection: Have you ever felt as if you might just step out for the sake of Christ, if only God would open up the ‘right’ opportunity? Pray that God would give you the heart to take more risks on his behalf, and for the sake of other people in need of his healing message.

³⁴ Nolland, 325 ff.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 329.

Response: “Might God, I’m seeking you today, and I do not want to shut my eyes to the hurting people of this world. Help me to do the Golden Rule today in a concrete way by ...”

The Two Gates – The Great Division Matthew 7:13-23

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’

If we were to summarize the entire Sermon on the Mount, we might use Judgment Day as our primary picture.³⁶ Here in this passage Jesus draws the ultimate line between the Kingdom of God, and everything else. Notice the contrasting language he uses: destruction vs. life; good fruit vs. bad; a narrow entry vs. a wide one. Also notice other key words that are meant to grab our attention: Wolves, fire, prophesy, miracles, and evildoers. In this passage Jesus instructs us to enter through the “narrow gate,” telling us that there are, in fact, two gates, both of which are presumed by people to lead to heaven. The only problem is, the enemy of your soul doesn’t mark gates. Jesus tells us to enter through the narrow gate, because the wide gate does not have a sign saying it leads a person to hell. This is the great division which Jesus causes in the world, the division which will be sorted out by reaping angels on the Day of Judgment.

In drawing such a hard separation, Jesus is aligning himself with the prophets of the Old Testament who preached judgment and salvation. In Matthew 13:24-30, Jesus teaches the

³⁶ H. Windisch, *The Meaning of the Sermon on the Mount*, Translation of: *Der Sinn der Bergpredigt*, (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1937), 197.

parable of the *wheat and the tares*, describing the Kingdom of God as a grain field that that must be reaped and separated, so that the good wheat is saved, but the weeds are burned. In Matthew 25 Jesus describes a separation of *sheep and goats*, making the same point. It might be easy to assume, given the way Jesus is portrayed in our time, that all this talk of hell and separation is simply fear mongering. But in Matthew 10:34 Jesus himself says, “Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.” For this reason we must take his teachings seriously. Fortunately for us, all of his teachings, including the Sermon on the Mount, are understood through the view of his cross-work. By accepting the death of Jesus as a substitute penalty for our sins, by embracing the all-loving God through his shed blood on the cross, and by placing our hope in his resurrection, we may enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. All Matthew wants us to understand in this passage is, there is no other way to get there but through Christ.

Reflection: Have you ever allowed yourself to entertain the idea that perhaps Jesus is not the only way to Heaven? Do you know of any other person, whether a parent, a loved one, or friend, who stretched out his arms and died on a cross for your sins? If you have allowed “wide road” thinking to creep into your heart, lay it aside and enter through the narrow gate of Christ alone.

Response: “Forgive me again, dear Lord, for ever putting you second to anything. I want you to be my everything, and I never want to lose sight of you in my life. Please cause me to walk with you for the rest of my life, and bring me back when I am straying. I love you, and I praise you because ...”

Hearing and Doing “These sayings of mine:” Back To The Top!

Matthew 7:24-27

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the

streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.

In this concluding passage Jesus compares his teachings to a rock. The biblical imagery of the Lord himself being our rock is important and wonderful. But there is even more here, as we have just learned from the Master teacher how to live life as Kingdom people. Once we have heard all his words, we are instructed to put them to work, to walk by them, to build our lives upon them. Again we see the contrast between the wise and foolish, as well as the blessing vs. the great crash. We can see how important it is to build on Jesus' words, but what how might we *continue* to build on this foundation? The answer is that we must remain teachable, or "meek." Our final Beatitude, which we have yet to look at, is the third bonus, and it is found in 5:5. It reads as follows: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

The Greek word for "meek" (πραῦς), is used to describe a person of *humility*. Jesus describes himself as being "meek," (ie., gentle, and humble), in Matthew 11:29, when he urges us to take his yoke upon ourselves and to *learn* from him. Also, James 1:21 instructs, "get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, and *meekly accept the word* planted in you, which can save you."³⁷ What these two examples point to is the notion that being meek is, in part, characterized by willingness to learn, by being *teachable*. What this calls for then, is a journey back to the top of the Sermon on the Mount, to start all over, re-reading the teachings of Jesus, and praying our way through them. In this way we will be building our lives upon the rock, which is Jesus himself, as well as his teachings.

Reflection: What have you learned by reading and studying Jesus' Sermon on the Mount? Are there things which you want to understand more deeply? What would your life be like if you finished this study by deciding to take Jesus' message seriously, and base your entire life on his teachings?

Response: "Dear Jesus..."

³⁷ Jas 1:21.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Black, M., ed., *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, (London, UK: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1972).
- Bruner, F.D., *Matthew, A Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004).
- Davies, W.D., Allison, D.C., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, (Edinburgh, U.K., T & T Clark Ltd., 1988).
- France, R.T., *Matthew; Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985).
- Hemfelt, R., and Fowler R., *Serenity, A Companion for Twelve Step Recovery*, (Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN, 1990).
- Holmes, M.W., *The Apostolic Fathers; Greek Texts and English Translations*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999).
- Jobes, K.H. and Silva, M., *Invitation to the Septuagint*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000).
- Keener C.S., *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999).
- Kittel, G., Friedrich, G., and Bromiley, G.W., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Translation of: Theologisches Wörterbuch Zum Neuen Testament. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995).
- New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update*, (LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995).
- Nolland, J., *The Gospel of Matthew; A Commentary on the Greek Text, New International Greek Testament Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005).
- Swanson, J., *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains : Greek (New Testament)*. electronic ed. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).
- The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).
- Webster's New World Dictionary, Third College Edition*, (Cleveland, OH: 1988).
- Windisch, H., *The Meaning of the Sermon on the Mount*, Translation of: Der Sinn der Bergpredigt, (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1937).