

Sound Living

The Sermon on the Mount

Matthew
5:1-7:27

Jerry Nelson

God has not called us to spectacular signs and wonders or to great accomplishments, but to the simplicity of moral obedience. This is not just law keeping and it is not cold duty; it is active, willing responsiveness to Jesus. It is not a prescribed path to walk but a person to follow.

Is your Christianity more of convenience than conviction? Do you call yourself a Christian but you are not a Christ-follower? Have you wanted the gift of heaven without the Giver? Is Christianity for you more a doctrine to be held than a relationship to be lived?

Join others in becoming a Christ-follower.

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Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 5:1—7:27

The Beatitudes

Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountain side and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them saying:

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.

Salt and Light

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.

The Fulfillment of the Law

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.

Murder

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.

Adultery

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.

Divorce

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.

Oaths

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.

An Eye for an Eye

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. 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.

Love for Enemies

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.

Matthew 6

Giving to the Needy

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

Prayer

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.

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:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.
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.

Fasting

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.

Treasures in Heaven

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.

Do Not Worry

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

Matthew 7

Judging Others

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.

Ask, Seek, Knock

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.

The Narrow and Wide Gates

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.

A Tree and Its Fruit

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!'

The Wise and Foolish Builders

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.

(All Scripture taken from the New International Version)

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Chapter One

Blessed are the sat upon, spat upon, ratted on Matthew 5:1-12

Many people and maybe you, live with an unsettling awareness of God. We get very busy and push Him aside for periods of time but like a distinct memory of some past significant event, He incessantly creeps back into our thoughts. We can't seem to shake Him. Most of us reading this can't live unaware of God. We might live in defiance of Him, in fear of Him, in truce with Him but not unaware of Him. Something keeps bringing Him back to mind.

Most of us were reared in religion—we were taught there is a God and we accepted that. We were encouraged to comply with what is "right" and threatened to avoid the "wrong." We got the distinct impression that if we understood the right things (believed them) and stayed within certain limits of behavior we could reasonably expect God to reward that with a measure of prosperity and safety in this life and the next. And if we made any serious mistakes along the way, we could just hope that God was as forgiving as we had heard.

Most of us decided not to take any chances with this and so after sowing some wild oats in youth, we settled down into a modicum of morality and religious decorum. But there's a nagging suspicion that there is more to God than what we know. There's a vague, unarticulated, thought that maybe we are supposed to be connected to God in ways we don't experience. So we have an uneasy truce with God—a bargain of sorts: we'll do our best to keep our end of the bargain and we'll expect Him to keep His. But the bargain doesn't seem to hold. Over 20 years, your parents divorced,

you didn't get into the college you had set your heart on, your fiancée backed out of the relationship, your job disappeared in a recession, your wife got chronically ill, your teen-aged daughter got pregnant, and your father died after a terrible sickness.

***Most of us can't live unaware of God.
Something keeps bringing Him back
to mind.***

Have I overstated it? I don't think so, maybe the specifics are different but over 10, 20 or 40 years, your story reads much the same. And in the midst of all that seems to happen to you, you know the people you've hurt and the wrong you've done and you vacillate between fearing you have caused all this to blaming God for being so unfair.

Something New

This description may not only be true of many 21st century American churchgoers but if you were a first century Jew, this may well describe your life and religious experience as well. Then one day you hear about a man holding meetings outside of town.

"In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.'" (Matthew 3:1-2)

He's claiming that something is available. He's saying that we will be able to experience God very differently than we do now.

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

Somehow, the "world" of God, (that we think of as "out there," "removed," "remote," "disconnected from our daily

reality”) is going to invade our personal 1st century “world” of the here and now. In light of what life is really like, we are intrigued by the idea but largely dismiss it as the ranting of a naïve fundamentalist.

***Can God truly affect my world
in these real ways?***

Not long after, however, we hear of another man preaching the same theme.

"From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." (Matthew 4:17)

But this time there was a difference. This time the teaching was accompanied by some incredible actions. It would have been easy to dismiss it as exaggerated propaganda if you and others hadn't been there.

"Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom..." (Matthew 4:23-25)

He said the “good news” was that God’s presence and power had invaded our world and was available to us, individually and corporately—life could be different.

Not only was He preaching “good news” but He went everywhere –*"healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them. Large crowds ...followed him."*

Among them were people we knew.

A neighbor’s mother paralyzed for years;

A friend’s child with seizures;

The lunatic that lived on the edge of town;
Your own brother healed when no one else could help.
And all the time, the clear implication is that this is just the tip of the iceberg—that this is, in part, what it means when the “world” of God – “the kingdom of heaven,” “the kingdom of God” - invades our “world.”

You can't help but remember what you learned in Sabbath school from the writings of the Prophet Isaiah.

"The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD...has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives... to comfort all who mourn..."(Isaiah 61:1-3)

The old prophet had said that a man would come doing this very thing. Could this be Him? Is it possible? Can God truly affect my world in these real ways? Can the “kingdom of heaven,” the “kingdom of God” – the presence, the rule and the power of God—actually touch my life?

Jesus once prayed, *"Father, Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."* Jesus' desire was that we would experience, here and now, some of God's kingdom world – God's will. He desires that just as God lovingly rules in heaven, so we would trust His loving rule in our lives here and now. This Jesus is very convincing. The Scribes and the Pharisees talked about God, but this man acts!

However, not long after, something happened that stretched credibility to the breaking point. This man Jesus read the very same text from the Prophet Isaiah that I've already referred to but listen to what He added:

"(Jesus) went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found

the place where it is written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.' Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing'." (Luke 4:16ff)

Jesus claimed that the "kingdom of heaven," the presence and power of God to truly affect and change our lives, is available through Him. A true connection with God, (not a God who is removed and disconnected, not a God who is largely irrelevant to my life but a present relationship with God) is made possible through Him.

This stretched credibility, as I said, because we knew where this man lived—in Nazareth. We knew his mother and brothers. He's just like any one of us. Well, not quite! Later when John the Baptist, that ranting desert preacher who first said the "kingdom of heaven is near," was in prison, he sent a message to Jesus asking:

"Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor." (Matthew 11:3-5)

By His very actions, this Jesus proved HE WAS AND IS the link between God's world ("The kingdom of heaven") and our world. It is true that the full power of God's kingdom is yet to be experienced but it had, in part, invaded the present. We are experiencing already a taste of what is yet to come. And we are experiencing it through this man

Jesus. This is a most important issue. The real presence of God in our lives is not made possible by holding some beliefs in our heads but by embracing a person in our hearts. But we are beginning to see that the “kingdom of heaven,” the presence and power and rule of God in life is available not just by the teachings of this man but through this man—only as we embrace Him. We are His disciples,

A true connection with God is made possible through Jesus.

we follow Him, we engage Him, we trust Him, we obey Him—we embrace Him. But most amazing of all is that this “kingdom” presence and power of God, this “God in the flesh” Jesus, is available to all of us.

Our old assumptions are disintegrating fast. We thought the religious leaders were the most likely to have access to God. We assumed that affluence and good health were indications of God’s approval and that the financially struggling were obviously under God’s disapproval. We thought those who were the most religious—those who knew the most about God, reached God best. But here God seems to be touching the least, the lowest, the slowest. He didn’t come first to the “most-likely-to-succeed” of Jerusalem; He started first among the blue-collar or no-collar residents of the backwater towns of Galilee—the unlikely. In fact, prior to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, I see Matthew telling a lot about the unlikely.

There’s an unlikely genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, in the first chapter where Matthew includes only five women—everyone “unlikely” – the hopelessly immoral, foreign or young. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a most unlikely choice. Matthew points out that Jesus would be from an

unlikely town—Nazareth of which it would be said, "*Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?*" (John 1:46)

He would select unlikely disciples—fisherman rather than learned leaders of Israel. And he would minister mostly to the most unlikely people—the sick, the lame, and the desperate living in the boondocks.

"A curious law of reversal seems to apply in matters of faith. The modern world honors intelligence, good looks, confidence, and sophistication. God apparently does not. To accomplish his work God often relies on simple, uneducated people who don't know any better than to trust him..."¹

Matthew then records that Jesus went up on the side of a hill. A huge crowd gathered around Him as He sat down and began to speak. He points to the very people He has just healed and says, in essence, the kingdom belongs to people like you—spiritual and social zeros. Crowding around Jesus were the least likely to succeed.

No one would look to this crowd for spiritual leadership in religion. And Jesus looked at that crowd and congratulated them! I think you would have had to see His face to know

"To accomplish his work God often relies on simple, uneducated people who don't know any better than to trust him..."

how excited He was. A herald from the king couldn't have announced anything with more authority, sincerity and finality than He did.

"You are blessed!" He said. You are blessed, you are blessed, you are blessed!

There are at least two fundamentally different ways of understanding the word "blessed" that Jesus uses. A very common way is to understand "blessed" to mean you will

be blessed, you will find favor with God, you will benefit, if you do these things. But Jesus did not say, “blessed are the poor in spirit” because they are poor in spirit. The parallel passage in Luke 6 demonstrates this.

“Looking at his disciples, he said:

*‘Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who hunger now,
for you will be satisfied.
Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.’” (6:20-21)*

When we read that, we aren’t saying we should attempt to become poor, or hungry, or weep, as conditions for being a Christian.

Likewise, Jesus in Matthew is not describing an attitude we should acquire but is simply describing what is—they are poor, poor in spirit, poor in status—the least likely. And on them the kingdom of heaven has come—Jesus is here! Jesus isn’t here asking anyone to become poor, meek or merciful or to mourn or hunger and thirst—He is simply describing what they already know themselves to be.

The other way of understanding the word “blessed” is as a synonym of “Congratulations! You are blessed!” “Congratulations” you who are poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is yours. The Beatitudes paint a picture of what people already are without God and by joyous contrast what they are and enjoy by God’s grace. These words are not lessons to be learned. They are not actions to be taken. They are not even attitudes to which we must aspire. We can’t take what Jesus announces as the good news of the kingdom and turn it into bad news about us.

I have heard people say, and I think I have said, when we read the Beatitudes we should be depressed at how far

short we fall in what God expects of us. I now think that is the exact opposite of what Jesus was declaring—He says “congratulations.” The Kingdom of heaven, the presence and rule of God has invaded your personal world—Jesus is

***The Kingdom of heaven, the presence
and rule of God has invaded your
personal world—Jesus is here and He
makes all the difference.***

here and He makes all the difference. We are tempted today to take the Beatitudes apart and handle each one separately as if it stood alone, independent of the others. But Jesus’ congratulations are most powerful when all the Beatitudes are studied together just as He preached them. That is why I have chosen to write one chapter on the Beatitudes rather than a chapter on each.

The Beatitudes

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (5:3)

“Perhaps the most appropriate synonym for the “poor in spirit” is “desperate”... those standing before God, stripped of all self-sufficiency, self-security, and self-righteousness.”²

“Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” God’s promise of life-transforming and death-transforming intervention in our lives is announced. Who are the poor in spirit—the desperate?

“The flunk-outs, the drop-outs, and burned-outs. The broke and broken. The drug-heads and the divorced. The HIV-positive and herpes-ridden. The brain-damaged, the incurably ill. The barren and the pregnant too-many-times or at the wrong time. The over-employed, the

underemployed, the unemployed. The unemployable. The swindled, the shoved aside, the replaced...The lonely, the incompetent, the stupid. The emotionally starved or emotionally dead.

"Even the moral disasters will be received by God as they come to rely on Jesus, count on him. Murderers and child-molesters. The brutal and bigoted. Drug lords and pornographers. War criminals and sadists. Terrorists. The perverted and the filthy and the filthy rich... Sometimes I feel I don't really want the kingdom to be open to such people. But it is. That is the heart of God. 'God's grubby people'."³

"Congratulations, you who are so desperate you will accept my favor; God's presence and gracious rule have come to your life."

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." (5:4)

"Mourn" is like Luke's "weeping ones" - those whose mates have deserted them, the paralyzed by rejection, the grief-stricken over the death of a spouse or child, or those who seem to have had life stripped from them by financial disaster—to them Jesus comes. It includes those who live with remorse for the things they've done—they grieve over parts of their past.⁴

"For they shall be comforted." Knowing how totally unable we are to change the situation, we stand helpless and thus hopeless—then Jesus comes and offers Himself and it opens up whole new possibilities.

She and her husband came in to see me. She wept as she told about her life, the despicable things she has done – "beyond what you would believe" she told me. She spoke of slowly believing that God accepts her, slowly accepting

His forgiveness of her. She is living today in the full awareness of her own sin (desperate and mourning) but increasingly aware of the Kingdom of heaven—God’s presence and love in her world.

Jesus says, “Congratulations you who grieve over how helpless and hopeless you are on your own, you who mourn the things you’ve done, God has invaded your life with real comfort which means strength for the present and hope for the future.”

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."(5:5)

“Meek” This is a parallel to the first beatitude meaning virtually the same thing: Helpless, desperate, knowing they have nothing to offer or help. They expect nothing in life, knowing they don’t deserve anything.

“*for they will inherit the earth.*” Here the emphasis is on the future aspect of God’s kingdom rule—a day is coming when it will all be different—you will rule with Christ.

Jesus says, , who know you have no rights, who are intimidated by life, who expect nothing from life; .”

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."(5:6)

“*Hungering and thirsting for righteousness*” does not mean a strong desire for holy living but a desperate desire for change that God alone can bring. Perhaps they have failed so badly that night and day they cringe before their own sin and inwardly scream to be made pure. Maybe they have been severely wronged and long to see things made right – like parents who learn that the murderer of their child has been released from prison and is laughing at them.”⁵

In this fourth beatitude, Matthew summarizes the first three: Those who are desperate for God to act since they know they have no ability to do so on their own. They know they need God.

***Congratulations you who know you have
nothing to offer, by God's grace you
will one day have it all.***

Jesus says, "Congratulations you who have an insatiable desire for things to be different, knowing it can't go on the way it has, you will be satisfied, life will change – now in part and by God's promise, fully in the future."

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." (5:7)

"Merciful." One who has been taken to the end of his own rope, one who has seen how desperate he is, one who knows his own failings and has seen that God will accept him, cannot help but have a merciful attitude.

Jesus says, "Congratulations, you who know what it means to be forgiven, not because you deserve it but just because God loves you, and you find yourself thinking of others the same way—not judging them but forgiving them—you will be shown mercy in the coming day of judgment."

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." (5:8)

"Pure in heart" has to do with honesty, transparency, no pretense, no mixed motives, no holding out to make a deal with God, just total integrity.

Jesus says, "Congratulations, you who have no pretense about your condition, who stand openly, nakedly, honestly, transparently before God, seeking no deals, just grace,

looking to Him alone for any hope, you will see God—you will be fully accepted into His presence.”

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.” (5:9)

Jesus says, “Congratulations, you who have found peace with God in Me, and just as with mercy so here, having found peace, you act that way toward others—you will be called sons of God, you will have the closest possible relationship with God—His children.”

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (5:10)

Jesus says, “Congratulations you who belong to God and live in conflict with the world’s values and actions. You have a whole new perspective on life and as a result you live in tension with the world. This only proves what is true—the kingdom of heaven—God’s presence, rule and power are yours now and more fully in the future.

I really don’t believe the Beatitudes were written to challenge Christians to a greater or deeper religious commitment. I don’t think they were written to show a non-Christian what he or she needed to do to become a Christian. They were written to those who already know they can’t do it on their own: those who already know they need God!

Jesus says, “Congratulations. God has come to you!” He has come to you in the person of Jesus. He offers not a code of conduct, and not a religion, but rather, Himself. The kingdom of heaven is near—God’s gracious invasion of your world is as near as Jesus.

End Notes

¹ Phillip Yancey, *Reaching for the Invisible God*, p. 39

² Bob Guelich, *A Foundation for Understanding the Sermon on the Mount*, p. 98

³ Dallas Willard , *The Divine Conspiracy*, p. 123-5

⁴ Ibid, p.116

⁵ Ibid, p. 123-5

Chapter Title taken from Paul Simon's song, *Blessed*

Chapter Two

A Witness to Grace Matthew 5:13-16

Do you consider yourself a Christian? How long since you shared the gospel with someone? How many people have you led to Christ? We are supposed to be salt and light. Are you? If you aren't sharing your faith with others then maybe you are as worthless as diluted salt or a covered light. If you are a Christian don't you have an obligation to be salt in your place of work and light in your neighborhood? Do people stop their swearing and dirty stories when you are around? Do people hear the gospel when you show up? If you are uncomfortable hearing those words, I can assure you I am much more uncomfortable writing them. Is this just another way to make us feel guilty about how we ought to be better witnesses, better evangelists, getting more converts?

I start this way because I want to make a point: Maybe some of you are feeling strong about your faith and you are filled with a desire or at least an obligation to tell others the truth about Christianity. But many of you know yourselves well enough to know that you are barely certain you are a Christian much less feeling like you have anything to offer anyone else. Initiating a spiritual conversation with your neighbor or co-worker is as foreign to you as being called on to preach a sermon in a televised Billy Graham Evangelistic Crusade.

You say, "I'm facing a lay-off, my mother-in-law is sick, my kid is messing up, I can't get everything done at work, I can't keep everybody happy at home and I'm supposed to be an evangelist? What a joke!" How many times have you

heard sermons about evangelism or witnessing and have come away feeling like a failure? How many times have you heard about one more thing you must be doing if you are a good Christian?

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount was supposed to be good news!

When looking at Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, I am more and more certain that Jesus' words here in chapter 5, verses 13-16, have often been misunderstood and misapplied to the detriment of individuals and the church. What was supposed to be "good news" somehow got turned into bad news. Imagine if you had been in the crowd the day Jesus was speaking and you heard these words:

"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."(Matthew 5:13-16)

Being bold, you stick up your hand and say, "Wait a minute, Jesus! 'Salt of the earth.' 'Light of the world.' That's pretty lofty stuff. You can't possibly be serious when You say that's me. I can't do that. That's for people who 'have their act together' – we're just novices, barely certain of our own relationship to You and very certain we don't have anything to offer anyone else. Jesus, when you started your sermon with the beatitudes, the 'blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn,' and the rest, we

identified but You jumped to us being the salt of the earth and the light of the world and that seems way beyond us. Would You start again and go back over that first part once more?"

That may not have happened then, but let us do that now. In Matthew 4:23-25 it says, "*Jesus went throughout Galilee...preaching the good news of the kingdom...*" He said, "*The kingdom of heaven is near.*" He is not saying the end is coming soon. The "good news" was that God's "kingdom," God's presence, God Himself, had invaded our

By simply trusting Jesus, the kingdom of heaven—the presence and power and rule of God—invades our lives.

world and was available to us, individually and corporately. Life could be different; God had come to our world. Jesus claimed that the "kingdom of heaven," the presence and power of God to truly affect and change our lives, was available through Him—through Jesus. A true connection with God (not a God who is distant and disconnected, not a God who is largely irrelevant to my life)—a relationship here and now with God is made possible through Jesus as we embrace Him.

But most amazing of all was that this "kingdom" presence and power of God, this "God in the flesh" Jesus was now available to all of us—to me. Old beliefs disintegrated fast. God among us, in Jesus, seemed to be touching the least, the lowest, the slowest. He didn't come first to the "most-likely-to-succeed" of Jerusalem; He started first among the blue-collar residents of the backwater towns of Galilee. He came to us. He loved us. He healed us. He cared for us.

It is not the highborn, the powerful, or the religiously trained who are in possession of God. Jesus proclaims that the kingdom is not more open to them than others but in fact their privileged position may blind them to their need. The kingdom of heaven—the presence and love of God—is open to every one of us. And amazingly, He doesn't say we have to measure up to some standard of behavior to have this relationship.

Contrary to popular opinion, in what we call the "Beatitudes," Jesus doesn't describe what we have to do to be blessed. He describes what we already are – "grubby people," spiritual losers—and says that by accepting Him, by embracing Jesus, we are given the benefits of the kingdom of heaven, the very presence of God. Not by right living, not by religious knowledge, not by institutional loyalty to a church but simply by trusting Jesus, the kingdom of heaven—the presence and power and rule of God—invades our lives.

Someone might say, "Didn't Jesus say we had to repent?" Yes, He did: *"Repent for the Kingdom of heaven is near."* Again, He is not saying, "repent or perish." "Repent" is not a demand to confess our individual sins and live a better life in order to earn a relationship with God. "Repent" is to change our minds—to reconsider or to rethink the way we relate to God.

At root, the problem is not that we do wrong things but that we have a wrong relationship. We think of God as remote and disconnected from our everyday lives and we treat Him that way—as a concept to believe but not someone to engage. But Jesus came and said the Kingdom of heaven is at hand—God is here and He is available to us just as we are, especially as we are! God has come in Jesus and asks only that we accept Him, reach out to Him,

embrace Him, engage Him, and trust Him. That is the good news. And when we embrace Him, when we trust Him, when we enter into a relationship with Him, we become “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world.”

Please notice Jesus doesn't say, “You ought to be the salt of the earth.” “You ought to be the light of the world.” He says, “You are!”

In fact, the word Jesus used is emphatic – “You, yourselves are.” Or in my paraphrase – “Yes, you! Surprised? It's true.”

Not you in 5 years when you understand more.

Not you in 10 years when you can defend your beliefs.

Not you in 15 years when you are more mature in your faith.

But “You, now, are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.”

Jesus is not, in this statement, indicting anyone for failure. It is simply wrong to suggest Jesus is here commanding spiritual sluggards to get busy in evangelism. Think again about the people He is talking to: these people are not schooled, trained, or veteran Christians. Jesus is simply stating a fact: In your new relationship with me you are now, “the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world.”

Salt of the Earth

When He says, “You are the salt of the earth,” what does He mean? I am really put off by many attempts to make this complicated by describing many characteristics of salt (such as it cleanses, preserves, seasons, etc) and how we

should be like that. Jesus is simply saying that just as salt is an essential commodity in everyday life so you are vitally important in the world. You represent a relationship with God!

***You, now, are the salt of the earth
and the light of the world.***

Then Jesus proceeds to tell a little parable—the point of which is frankly rather difficult to discern. He basically says that if salt loses its effectiveness, it's not good for anything except to be thrown out. Someone could really run with this, suggesting that Jesus is saying a Christian can cease to be a Christian or that a Christian who doesn't witness is worthless and will "be thrown out and trampled by men." I confess I don't know all that Jesus meant here but in the context of the good news He is declaring, it seems incongruous to suggest such a negative meaning. In light of the following parallel metaphor and parable about light it seems more likely that Jesus is using the negative to emphasize the positive—you aren't salt-less and worthless, you are the real thing, the salt of the earth. Your presence and your life make a difference in your world.

Elihu Burrit wrote, "No human being can come into this world without increasing or diminishing the sum total of human happiness, not only of the present but of every subsequent age of humanity. No one can detach himself from this connection. There is no sequestered spot in the universe, no dark niche along the disc of nonexistence to which he can retreat from his relations with others, where he can withdraw the influence of his existence upon the moral destiny of the world. Everywhere his presence or absence will be felt. Everywhere he will have companions who will be better off or worse because of him... (Our lives)

are forming characters for eternity."¹

Light of the World

Then Matthew changes the metaphor but only to make the same point: You are vital in this world – “You are the light of the world.” Jesus had said that of Himself: “*I am the light of the world.*” In Matthew 4:13-17, the text just before the Sermon on the Mount, we read,

‘Leaving Nazareth, (Jesus) went and lived in Capernaum... to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah... ‘The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.’ From that time on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.’”

One of the purposes Jesus had for coming into the world is now our purpose in the world—to be light, to demonstrate the truth of God’s real presence in our lives.

Jesus is the light of God’s presence that was promised. God has drawn near to human beings through the person of Jesus. And now Jesus turns to God’s grubby people, all of us with our failings and insecurities, and says we are the light of the world. We reflect to those around us what it means for God to come—for God to invade our very real personal worlds. Then using two short parables Jesus makes the point that light is for a purpose—to give light. A city on a hill will give light and a lamp is lit for the purpose of giving the most light possible.

One of the purposes Jesus had for coming into the world is now our purpose in the world—to be light, to demonstrate the truth of God’s real presence in our lives. His kingdom has come to us. And so Jesus says in Matthew 5:16, “*In the*

same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” How do we let our light shine? What “good deeds” are others supposed to see?

Bearing Witness

What we witness to is not just some abstract truth, not just a set of propositions that someone else is supposed to accept. We aren't in a business where after showing someone the steps, the laws, or a diagram, we try to close the sale. We don't reduce it to getting someone to say a little prayer at the end of our monologue. We aren't selling anything.

Have you ever tried to evangelize someone? Ever been part of an evangelistic team visiting someone's home? Ever had a conversation at work or with a friend and you felt the requirement to “witness” at them?

We turned a normal conversation into something tense. We felt ourselves choking up. We felt threatened and then so did they. All of the sudden we felt more like a soap or vitamin salesman than a friend.

I have been part of evangelistic teams as far back as my college days—street evangelism, beach evangelism, door-to-door evangelism, survey evangelism, visitation evangelism, so-called “friendship” evangelism, and probably more. As a pastor surely I should not only have a desire for these experiences but should be effective in them. I should be able to teach others how to evangelize. I can't tell you how many times I have taken others with me to demonstrate how it's done. We learned how to make small talk: to break the ice by talking about their kids, their homes, their jobs and then we were supposed to look for a way to turn the conversation to spiritual things so we could tell them the truths they needed to believe to be “born again.” We were

taught how to bring it to a decision. But it often felt so contrived.

I truly thank God for you who can make those visits out of genuine love and can establish genuine relationships—but usually I couldn't. I was too often just fulfilling a religious responsibility. I wasn't truly desiring to befriend that person whether they ever responded to my gospel or not. I no longer want a "method" of evangelism. I want to care for friends enough to want them to hear the good news that God, in Jesus, has invaded my life with mercy and grace and He will invade their life, too.

The Good News

In Matthew 4:23-25 it says, "*Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom...*" He said the "good news" was that God's presence and power had invaded our world and was available to us. Individually and corporately, life could be different now. We don't have just a set of propositions to convince them of. We have a Person we want them to meet—a Person who loves them very much. We don't just represent a religion. We don't just represent a philosophy of life. Rather, we've experienced a Person, Jesus, and we tell about Him!

We can know theology without knowing Jesus. We can know and talk about "the four spiritual laws" and the "steps to peace with God" without knowing Jesus. The good news is that the Kingdom of Heaven is here—it has arrived in Jesus—God is with us. We can now know Jesus! Dallas Willard wrote, "Jesus' enduring relevance is based on his historically proven ability to speak to, to heal and empower the individual human condition. He matters because of what he has brought and what he still brings to ordinary human beings, living their ordinary lives and coping daily with their surroundings. He promises wholeness for their

lives. In sharing our weakness he gives us strength and imparts through his companionship a life that has the quality of eternity."²

I want them to hear the good news that God, in Jesus, has invaded my life with mercy and grace and He will invade their life, too.

When Jesus was here, He was so attractive that people couldn't be kept away.

They came from all over to see and hear Him.

They ripped the roof off a building to get to Him.

They invited Him to their homes.

And, it's important to note that it was the prostitutes, tax collectors, those with whom the religious people would have nothing to do, that were most interested in being with Jesus. Why? Not because His doctrine was correct but because His love was so evident. Would it revolutionize our relationships with our neighbors and co-workers if we saw them not as potential converts, but as people—people God and we care about?

Bob Guelich wrote, "The life of the disciple does not stand out by a greater obedience to the Law – either the Mosaic Law or Jesus' 'new law' – but by a conduct that reflects the new relationship between the individual and God... Just as Jesus' life and teaching bore witness to God's redemptive activity to those who had eyes to see and ears to hear, so the disciple's good deeds lead other to recognize the presence of God's transforming power in us... Discipleship means living one's life in relationship to God and to others so that God's life-changing role might become evident to others."³ That makes me feel insecure. "Life-change" in me

is difficult for me to see. I wonder if I'm really all that different from people who don't know Jesus. I'm still at times fearful, angry, impatient, unforgiving, lustful, jealous, prideful, and the dark list could go on.

What has happened in my life with Jesus? What can I bear witness to? I'm forgiven—the real guilt for my sins against God and others is removed. (I still feel guilty for the past, sometimes, but I know I'm forgiven). I'm loved—I am not alone in the universe, God has chosen to love me. And

The prostitutes, tax collectors and others... were the most interested in being with Jesus. Why? Because His love was so evident.

Jesus' love for me won't quit, won't give up, and won't fail even when I do. My everyday life, the days I feel great and the days I feel lousy about life, are all in His hands. Every circumstance of my life, missed appointments, flat tires, rebellious kids, unemployment, and all the rest is in His control and given or allowed because of His love for me. That's hard to see sometimes but I know it's true.

I bear witness to a relationship with God not by my effort or merit but solely by His grace.

I bear witness to my unworthiness met by His mercy.

I bear witness to my certain death overcome by His life.

I bear witness to my darkness penetrated by His light.

I bear witness to a person—Jesus—who has invaded my life. If you are trusting Jesus, you are the salt of the earth, and the light of the world. God has invaded our lives with His love. We now bear witness to God's presence in the world and His availability to any who will receive Him. How? By loving others the way God loves us.

End Notes

¹ John MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7*, p. 236

² Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, p. 13

³ Ibid

Chapter Three

Introduction to Kingdom Living Matthew 5:17-20

Jesus said in Matthew 5:20, "*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.*"

Unless you have no regard for Jesus, you have to admit that is a very significant statement! What do you make of that statement? What do you understand Jesus to be saying? Immediately after that statement, read what Jesus goes on to say:

"You have heard that it was said... '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." (Matthew 5:21-22)

And, *"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."* (Matthew 5:27-28)

And four more times, in chapter 5, Jesus illustrates His point by taking what the people had heard was God's law and raising the standard.

Now read His introductory words again:

"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." (Matthew 5:20)

What Does Jesus Mean?

Let me suggest some possibilities:

- Unless you are better than the Pharisees you won't go to heaven.
- Unless you are covered by Jesus' goodness you won't go to heaven.

Both of these answers are partially correct but woefully insufficient!

Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the ... teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."

In the first two chapters in this series I attempted to establish that the "good news" Jesus brought was that we can have a relationship with God through Him. In fact when we recognize our own need and inability, and we accept Jesus in His sufficiency, we are brought into relationship with Jesus by His grace not by anything we have done. But beginning in verse 17, Jesus anticipates the same misunderstanding Paul echoes in his letters to the Romans and the Ephesians. We might call it the problem of grace.

Grace

If God brings us into His kingdom by grace and not based on what we do, won't that give people license to break God's laws and say obedience doesn't matter? Jesus answers that in Matthew 5:17:

"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."

Referring to the "Law or the Prophets" was the common way to refer to the entire Old Testament Scriptures.

Another way was to simply refer to it as the “Law.” In other words Jesus says, don’t misunderstand—I didn’t come to set aside God’s commands and prophecies but to fulfill them. In this, Jesus addresses two issues:

1. Grace doesn’t mean obedience doesn’t matter. The people listening to Jesus that day had long lived under a religious system that said they had to measure up to belong to God. Very much like many today, they thought that if they did what God commanded and didn’t do what He forbid, they would be judged worthy of the kingdom of heaven. But they knew full well they couldn’t live up to the standard and so they lived in fear of God and especially what might happen at death.

Then Jesus came, powerfully demonstrating that He was from God. And He even broke some of the Pharisees’ laws while proclaiming that a relationship with God was made available through Him. Does accepting Jesus mean we no longer have to obey the law? Does grace mean obedience is nice but not essential? No, grace doesn’t mean obedience doesn’t matter. Jesus emphasizes how much it matters in the coming verses.

The Old Testament Scriptures all point to Jesus. And Jesus came to fulfill the Scriptures.

2. But there is a second point Jesus makes in the 17th verse:

"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 came to fulfill the Scriptures. What does He mean? We are tempted to treat the Old Testament as if it is simply

a rather random collection of history, poems, obscure prophecies, elaborate religious rituals, and hundreds of dos and don'ts. But God says that the Old Testament Scriptures all point to Jesus.

The history of the people of Israel is a picture of the condition of all God's people: sin, captivity and then deliverance by God's grace.

The sacrifices of the Old Testament and the way they were offered all point to Jesus' final sacrifice of Himself for us. The ceremonies of Passover and Pentecost point to Jesus. The prophecies find their fulfillment in Jesus and His kingdom. And all the righteous demands of the law were met in Jesus—He, and He alone, lived the law perfectly. Here is the way Luke says it:

"And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he (Jesus) explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." (Luke 24:27)

One of the disciples said it this way:

"Philip found Nathaniel and told him, 'We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote –Jesus of Nazareth'..." (John 1:45)

Everything about the sacrifices, the ceremonies, the holy days, the prophecies and even the history of the people of Israel pointed toward a Messiah. Jesus said rightly that He is the fulfillment of all it presaged.

The Kingdom of Heaven

For over 2000 years God was preparing His people for the coming of the kingdom of heaven and in Jesus, it arrives. And John said, *"to all who received him...he gave the right to become children of God."* (John 1:12) Or as Paul put it,

"For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves..." (Colossians 1:13) And in 2 Corinthians 5:21, *"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."*

Jesus means two things:

Grace doesn't mean obedience doesn't matter. And Jesus Himself is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. The Old Testament pointed toward the kingdom and Jesus brings it in.

This is a very good time to make certain we understand what Jesus means by the "kingdom of heaven." Jesus does not simply mean the place where you go when you die. In Webster's dictionary, "kingdom" is defined as a place over which a king rules—e.g. "The United Kingdom" It is also defined as the people over which a king rules. But it is also defined as the position or rank or power of a king. Or as I would say it, "The king's reign and authority."

In Daniel 5:26 we read of King Belshazzar, *"God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end."* Obviously the geography didn't cease to exist and the people didn't all die. What changed was that Belshazzar's authority, his reign, was ended and given to another king. Belshazzar's kingdom ended. So the "Kingdom of heaven" is not first of all a place but is God's authority, His right to rule.

In Mark 10:15 Jesus said, *"I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."* What is He asking us to receive? Heaven? No, He is asking us to receive God's rule and authority in our lives. In Matthew 6:33 Jesus says, *"Seek first his (God's) kingdom."* Are we being asked to seek heaven? No,

we are being asked to desire God's sovereign rule in our lives. When we pray, "Thy kingdom come," are we asking for heaven to come? No. As the prayer goes on, "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," we see that His kingdom is His rule, His authority, as sovereign king.

When Jesus speaks of the "kingdom," the "kingdom of heaven," or the "Kingdom of God" He is speaking of God's authority and rule. When He says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" He is saying that by God's grace they are brought under the sovereign authority and loving protection of God.

***Grace doesn't mean obedience
doesn't matter.***

Here's another way of understanding it. The Bible refers to "this age" and "the age to come." We understand "this age" to mean the one in which we presently live and "the age to come" as the one ushered in when Jesus comes again. We also think of "this age" as being ruled by sin and death (the kingdom of this world) and "the age to come" as being ruled by God—the "kingdom of heaven."

But what Jesus came announcing was the good news that God's kingdom has reached back into this age. Jesus said the "kingdom of heaven is near" not meaning near in time, but near in availability—it is right here available to us in Jesus. If we are in the kingdom of God or the kingdom of God is in us, it means we are in God's loving presence and under His sovereign rule now. It is true that a day is coming, at the return of Jesus, when God's kingdom will reign in all places and over all people but now He has reached down to us and offered His presence and rule to those who will receive Jesus. That is why for the Apostle

Paul, death had lost its sting. Since we are already in the kingdom of God, death simply means a change of location—from the presence of God here to the presence of God in heaven.

Now what has all that to do with the law? God's kingdom is God's sovereign rule, God's authority. To ask if God reigns in your life is to ask if God is boss. Jesus is saying, I didn't come to abolish God's rule, God's law, I came to fulfill it. In fact, in verse 18, He says in essence, I want you to understand that the Law is absolutely trustworthy—everything about it, from the "smallest letter" to the "least stroke of a pen," will be accomplished. Everything it foreshadows or points toward will be accomplished.

Then lest they miss His point about how important God's word and commandments are, He says again,

Jesus is the author of the Old Testament (Jesus' Bible) and He is the fulfillment of it. He is the King of the Kingdom.

"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." (Matthew 5:19)

It seems rather evident that the "commandments" to which Jesus is referring are those in the Old Testament. Those who are now in the "kingdom" must understand that the King's standards have not been relaxed.

Jesus is the author of the Old Testament (Jesus' Bible) and He is the fulfillment of it. He is the King of the Kingdom. Just as you can't have the kingdom without the king, so you can't have the king without his rule and authority – his

laws. Here's the way the Apostle John said it:

"We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did."

(1 John 2:3-6)

But isn't that a contradiction? I began by writing that a relationship with God was available by grace alone and I've ended by explaining we have to obey the King's commands. I actually started with verse 20 where I asked what Jesus means when He says, "... `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'."

A Higher Standard

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law (the scribes) were the good guys in Israel. They were the best of the best. Everyone looked up to the Pharisees as the truly spiritual ones. Surely if God were going to accept anyone it would be the Pharisees who so meticulously lived by the law. But Jesus says you won't even become part of the kingdom of heaven (and remember "kingdom of heaven" means God's presence and rule in your life here and now) unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees. But look at the King's interpretation of the Law in what follows in this chapter.

It is not enough that we don't commit adultery, we aren't even supposed to lust. It is not enough that we don't murder, we aren't even supposed to hate. Jesus says the righteousness of the kingdom is higher than even what the

Pharisees practiced.

In these words Jesus lays claim not only to our actions but also to our thoughts and motives. These serious, severe, demands of the law of God cut down to the bone of my being—it exposes my innermost thoughts for the evil they are. When I see the depth of what God intended by His law, I see myself as further from Him, less capable of ever measuring up. And we think to ourselves, “If the Pharisees couldn’t make it by keeping a lower standard, I have no chance of making it with the higher standard Jesus sets.” But understand it this way: our righteousness must surpass the Pharisee’s righteousness not in degree but in kind. It is not that we must get a higher score on a law-keeping test but that we must have a different kind of righteousness. The Pharisee’s righteousness was an outward conformity to a manipulated standard. But Jesus calls for an inward change of heart.

Righteousness doesn’t start with effort or keeping laws. Righteousness starts with faith. Paul wrote in Romans 3:21, *“But now a righteousness from God, apart from the law, has been made known, to which the law and the prophets testify.”*

The Old Testament, that great book of the law, says we don’t start with effort or keeping the law, we start with faith. Genesis 15:6 states, *“Abram believed the LORD (had faith), and he (God) credited it to him as righteousness.”* By trusting in Jesus, we are granted His righteousness. And only by having Jesus’ righteousness imputed to us can we have a right relationship with a holy God. But that is exactly what the King of the Kingdom does; He grants us His righteousness. By faith then, our newly acquired righteousness (the righteousness of Jesus) far surpasses the righteousness of the Pharisees.

By reiterating the high standard of the law Jesus

adequately demonstrates how wholly incapable anyone is to keep it on his/her own. The law drives us to grace—our only hope. But if we go back to verse 19 we see that is not all Jesus means when He sets forth the law in the following verses. Jesus means for us live it.

Matthew 5:19 says, *"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."*

It is not just a matter of trusting Jesus and having His

***The Kingdom of Heaven means
God's presence and rule in your
life here and now.***

righteousness and then whether we ever obey Him is nice but not essential. As I said earlier, there is no kingdom without a King and there is no King without rule and authority. To be part of the kingdom of heaven is to be in the loving presence and under the sovereign rule of the King.

What Jesus does with the law is two things:

He drives us to grace. And then He shows us the awesome possibilities of kingdom living.

In Jeremiah 31:31 we read, *"after that time," declares the LORD, "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts."* And in Ezekiel 36:27, God said this change and the power to obey would happen by His Spirit: *"And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."*

Being made righteous by God's Spirit, it is now possible for

Kingdom people to live in a whole new way—a kingdom lifestyle. That is what the rest of the Sermon on the Mount will do—it will show us the awesome possibilities of kingdom living.

We must never pit grace against obedience to the law. But we must understand the distinction. Obedience doesn't earn grace. Grace empowers obedience. Yes, Jesus expects His kingdom people to live kingdom lifestyles. And it is possible by His grace. Our great propensity is to lower the standard of the law so that the most disciplined or self-righteous can think they measure up to it. And then those same people keep shouting that law to everyone else thinking they can threaten people into obedience.

The law shows me how wounded, sin-sick and desperate I truly am.

We fear that if we don't enforce law keeping, everyone will slip away into lawlessness. And for a while we can at least threaten and cajole people into outward conformity to giving, serving, evangelism, attendance in worship, sexual abstinence outside of marriage, not divorcing, and many others. But no amount of threat can enforce an inner conformity of the heart with the real standards of God's law for kingdom living.

Law won't motivate and Law won't empower. A real change happens only by grace and in response to grace. When the law does its job properly, it shows us how desperate we truly are. It shows me that by my own actions, words and motives, I stand condemned before a holy God. And it shows me a standard of holiness that I can never hope to attain on my own. It is only when I know how desperate I am that I am willing to cry out to a Savior. And the Savior

is the very same King who made the laws.

Luther said God is at first our accuser and then he is our defender. I may at first look at my own interpretation of the law and try to convince myself that I'm not all that bad. But then Jesus accuses me by His accurate interpretation of His law. When God finally overcomes me, convincing me that I am as bad as He says I am, then in grace He defends me saying He will not let my actions, words and motives stand between us.¹ The law shows me how wounded, sin-sick and desperate I truly am. But I cannot love or obey by being commanded to love or obey.

"I can only give my whole heart when another whole heart gives itself to me. I can only love if love is shown to me. And this is precisely the miracle that occurs when I stand before Jesus Christ. For there I see the Father's heart, the heart that tore itself away from that which it most loved, the only begotten son; the heart that bled for my sake; the heart that beats for a man who stands in the lowest place and dares not even to lift his eyes. And that man is me. Now I can love the One who suddenly stands beside me in the lowest place, instead of remaining in the glory of heaven.

"What the thunders of Sinai (the law) could not accomplish—the liberating of my heart to make it free to love, to be a child, and to feel at home in my Father's house—this is accomplished by the One who comes to me as my brother."²

The King's law shows me how much I need His grace and His grace shows me how much I want to obey the King's law.

End Notes

¹ Helmut Thielicke, *Life Can Begin Again*

² *Ibid*, p. 48

Chapter Four

Kingdom Living—Recognition and Reconciliation Matthew 5:21-26

Mary's parents died within two months of each other. And it wasn't until after their death that she discovered that, earlier, her sister with power of attorney, had transferred the bulk of the parents' modest estate to the sister's account leaving nothing for Mary or her other siblings. When confronted, the sister said that the parents had treated her unfairly all her life and the estate was owed to her. Mary never brought the subject up again but privately she grieved for her sister and prayed that God would forgive her.

Contrast that attitude with a startlingly different response as seen in an advertisement in the newspaper. In a prominently displayed ad with Joanne's picture were the following words:

"As the year 2001 draws to a close, Joanne Justus of Parker announces her divorce from Travis Justus of Larkspur. I am using this unique format to thank all my family and friends for standing by me throughout this ordeal. I'm also grateful to those of you who may not even realize how meaningful your acts have been and are to me."¹

Which woman would you rather have as a neighbor? Can you imagine relationships in which forgiveness and reconciliation were higher values than self-vindication and personal justice? Can you imagine a community in which truly caring for another person was of higher value than personally being treated fairly?

The woman who sought God's forgiveness for her thieving sister unfortunately strikes many of us as naïve. The woman who sought revenge on her ex-husband strikes many of us at first as funny. And frankly we live in a world that can identify much more quickly and closely with the divorced woman's resentment than with the cheated sister's forgiveness. We have grown accustomed to broken or breaking relationships. We don't like resentment and hostility when they are directed at us but we can't quite imagine a world without it. We've grown so accustomed to it that we might even wonder if life would be boring without it. It becomes the main fodder for our conversations – how so-and-so did such-and-such and what we did or might have done in response.

Can you imagine relationships in which forgiveness and reconciliation were higher values than self-vindication and personal justice?

But Jesus calls us to a whole different mind-set and lifestyle.

"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.

"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." (Matthew 5:20-26)

Jesus sets forth the great possibilities of kingdom living and how it would transform our relationships.

Instead of anger and estrangement Jesus calls us to forgiveness and reconciliation. This is a "kingdom of heaven" lifestyle. There is one more very important perspective we must have to properly understand these words. Remember, these strong words are from a person, Jesus.

Unless we appreciate that, we will never accept these words or be able to live them. What Jesus will now tell us about "kingdom" living is not a new set of even tougher rules by which we can earn his favor. The point He made earlier in the Sermon on the Mount is that, by grace, He has already accepted us just as we are. We belong to Him.

He now wants to speak to us about the great possibilities that can flow out of that relationship. You and I must understand that the one speaking is the very one who loves us deeply. His desire is only for our good and His wisdom is unimpeachable. Like a surgeon who must wound us deeply to heal us, so Jesus' words will cut deeply but they are to heal us and teach us a "kingdom" lifestyle.

And so Jesus begins to set forth the great possibilities of

the kingdom. And what an amazing life it would be. And most amazing is how it would transform our relationships. I'm indebted to author Dallas Willard, whose words I have modified to give an overview of the rest of Matthew chapter 5. Jesus illustrates "Kingdom living" by citing six relational issues and the difference between the way we usually live compared with His high calling on our lives.²

Situation	The Old Way	The New Way
Irritation with others	NO murder	Forgiveness and reconciliation
Sexual Attraction	NO intercourse	Love instead of Lust
Unhappy with marriage	Divorce	NO divorce
Wanting to be believed	Make vow to convince	Truth with integrity
Personally injured	Retaliation	Help the one who injured you
You have an enemy	Hate	Love and bless them

Let's look at Jesus' illustrations of the greater righteousness of "kingdom living."

"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." (Matthew 5:21-22a)

Jesus is not here arguing with the Mosaic Law nor with the

interpretation of it as far as the interpretation goes. He argues that the interpretation doesn't go far enough. We knew we weren't supposed to murder but Jesus says it goes much deeper than that—we aren't even supposed to carry resentment toward another.

Lest we misunderstand how serious Jesus is about this, He uses the same phrase to note the same consequence of both murder and anger—they are both "subject to judgment." We don't believe that do we? In our thinking, we have created a hierarchy of sins, some are clearly more wrong (for example, murder) and others are not so bad (for example, a little resentment). But Jesus says resentment is absolutely contrary to a kingdom attitude. He is calling us to something radically different. But before talking about the "radically different," first let His judgment on anger sink in!

"But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment."

Anger is subject to God's judgment? Anger serves an important function in our lives. It is a feeling that wells up within us when something or someone threatens us. Like pain, anger alerts us to a potential threat but in anger's case it is not an inanimate threat against my physical body but a threat to my will—something or someone is getting in the way of what I want. But what we do with the anger aroused by that perceived threat is the problem. If we indulge it, it grows. We may not act on it immediately but it builds within us.

The word "angry" used here is an orgy of feeling, a temporary madness—interesting that we speak of anger as being "mad" at someone. And the word carries the idea of a continuing attitude: "is being angry," "bears anger," "carries anger," or is "nursing a grudge," a continuing

anger, a prolonged, carried around anger. Fredrick Dale Bruner wrote, "It is this attitude of carried anger that Jesus confronts with judgment. This attitude must go. And this attitude is not just an attitude or an inner matter, an emotion that is not yet a deed; this carrying around of anger presupposes a decision to carry it, and such a

In our thinking, we have created a hierarchy of sins, some are clearly more wrong (for example, murder) but others are not so bad (for example, a little resentment).

decision constitutes a deed, a decision for a way to live."³ Anger can be almost totally hidden as in a slow-burning resentment. Or it can be very visible in an all-out search for ways to get back, to inflict harm, at least emotional harm. Just watch some teenagers to see it in its rawest forms. The only difference between them and us is that some of us have learned a sophisticated anger. My ego has been wounded. I consider myself to have been unjustly treated. We even get angry with someone when all we know is that they are angry with us, even if we don't know why.

Dallas Willard wrote: "All our mental and emotional resources are marshaled to nurture and tend the anger...Energy is dedicated to keeping it alive; we constantly remind ourselves of how wrongly we have been treated. And when it is allowed to govern our actions...its evil is quickly multiplied in heart-rending consequences and in the replication of anger and rage in the hearts and bodies of everyone it touches."⁴ Jesus goes on to drive home His point in the rest of verse 22:

"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." (Matthew 5:22b)

Like most kids, I was so woodenly literal in my understanding of Scripture that as a child I thought if I called my brother a "fool" I would go to hell. I thought there was something inherent in the word "fool" itself that meant you "didn't pass go and didn't collect \$200" but went straight to eternal jail. We aren't even certain what the word "Raca" means except that in context it is derisive. Together with the word "fool" it indicates an insulting contempt for another person. The problem is not so much in the word as in the heart. The words of contempt only express the boiling over of our hearts.

God judges words that take away from another person's honor.

Jesus' interpretation of the law goes beyond protecting life, it goes to protecting the person. God judges words that take away from another person's honor. In "kingdom living" every person is made in the image of God and is worthy of our love. And God is deadly serious about this. For in these verses He says this anger, resentment and contempt are subject to "judgment," the "Sanhedrin" and to the "fire of hell." Using repetition with this variation, Jesus is driving home the point that active disregard of another person is unacceptable in the kingdom of God. As I mentioned earlier, "Grace doesn't mean that obedience doesn't matter!"

Brunner wrote, "We do not do the Master of Love any honor by omitting references to judgment... The holiness of God is at war with all bitterness and hatred and hurting. And where His holiness collides with our hostility the crash is called the wrath of God. God's wrath is God's war of love

against everything that unnecessarily hurts others... The wrath of God is the proof of the love of God.”⁵ Chrysostom wrote, “It is love that warns of hell.”⁶ Does this mean that if I harbor anger toward someone, I am going to hell? Without intervention we would! That is how serious this sin is. It is wholly inconsistent with a kingdom lifestyle.

Nothing but the death of Jesus is sufficient to mitigate the divine penalty against that sin. Don’t make the sins Christ died for so abstract as to say the “sins of the world” without also making it very personal—my sins, my sin of anger toward (and fill in the name).

“Amazing love, how can it be that thou my God should’st die for me. Died he for me who caused his pain, for me who him to death pursued.”

If what Jesus said is true, then his words drive us to despair of ourselves both for our liability to judgment and our helplessness to be different. It is my sin that drives me to grace. I stand forgiven not because I deserve it but because Jesus died in my place.

I am called to a new way of treating others, by the same grace shown to me. And Jesus’ Spirit promises to empower me to want to and to do His good pleasure.

“Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” (Philippians 2:12-13)

And so by God’s grace working in us we choose to forgive instead of resenting. Crying out for God’s help, we make the choice. And we keep making the choice and act out

that choice in refusing to think what we used to think, refusing to say what we used to say, and acting in a whole new way toward the one we formerly resented. That is forgiveness—that is kingdom living.

When Marietta Jaeger's seven-year-old daughter was kidnapped from their tent during a camping trip in Montana, her initial reaction was one of rage. She wrote, "I was seething with hate, ravaged with a desire for revenge. I said to my husband and I meant it with every fiber of my

***By God's grace working in us we choose
to forgive instead of resenting.***

being "Even if Susie was brought back alive and well this minute, I could kill that man for what he has done to my family."

Marietta soon realized that no amount of anger could bring her daughter back. She wasn't ready to forgive her daughter's kidnapper but she wrestled with God. She finally surrendered and deep down inside she sensed that forgiving the man was the only way she could ever cope with her loss. She began praying for the kidnapper over the months that followed and her prayers became easier and easier.

Exactly one year, to the minute, after the abduction, she received a phone call—it was the kidnapper. The man's voice was smug and taunting and so Marietta was surprised at the genuine feeling of compassion she had for him. It was yet months later before the man was apprehended and Suzie's body was found. Marietta writes, "By then, I had finally come to learn that Jesus did not come to hurt but to reconcile."⁷

That is a kingdom of heaven attitude, possible only by the

grace of God—but possible by the grace of God. Again from Fredrick Bruner, “It is important to know, first, that we DO break God’s command so that we will be disabused of self-righteousness...But it is just as important that we know that we can keep God’s command, at least retroactively, by immediately seeking reconciliation with those whom we have hurt...Jesus is not content with just showing us up and bringing us down. He concludes his command by teaching us what to do when we go wrong.”⁸ So “kingdom living” calls not only for forgiveness for those who offend us but it calls for reconciliation with those we have hurt—whether we meant it for hurt or not. Jesus says in Matthew 5:23-24, *“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.”*

Jesus gives no indication of whether it was anything we actually did or not—the source of the wrong is not in view here, just that something is wrong. Jesus is even saying if we are the injured party we have an obligation to seek reconciliation.

He says reconciliation is a higher priority than worship. All the religious activity in a lifetime doesn’t negate the command to reconcile. We must not think that our efforts for the Lord in other areas compensate for our holding a grudge. Psalm 66:18 says *“If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.”*

“The Lord does not want to talk with a disciple who does not want to talk with a brother” or sister.⁹ What if the offended person won’t forgive me? That is her concern with God. I am only responsible for me and my attitude—am I willing and will I continue to be willing to reconcile? Nobody

is “written off” in the kingdom.

It wasn't until later that I recognized it for what it was. I was angry. No, intensely angry. My anger usually only shows in very civilized, controlled ways. I don't rant and rave and hit things. I just become quiet. And I was very quiet. A man, who had been a very good friend, had been actively slandering me for several weeks. He sought out people to tell about the way I had supposedly injured him and his family. His actions and words began coming back to me from many people. I went to him to apologize for any hurt I had caused and said (and meant!) that such hurt was truly unintended. But I received only further angry charges and an unwillingness to reconcile.

“The Lord does not want to talk with a disciple who does not want to talk with a brother” or sister.

He left our church to attend another one but kept making the same angry, slanderous charges including a misrepresentation of my attempt to reconcile. That's when I got mad (interesting use of that word in light of the fact that the Greek for anger is a word that connotes “out of our minds”). I remember thinking, so wrongly, “I maybe had to put up with that when he attended this church, but now that he has gone, there is no reason for me to take it any longer.” For days I seethed. I couldn't help thinking about it. This man with whom I was so angry, was now controlling my life. I imagined all kinds of things to say to him, of how to make him see how wrong he was, of how to give him some of his own medicine, how to punish him for daring to treat me that way. I called him on the phone and I let him have it. I even threatened to call his new pastor and tell the whole story if he didn't cease and desist. And

then I hung up!

After the phone call I felt good for about 30 seconds before the Holy Spirit went to work on me. I wrestled with God for a couple of days before calling the man again and asking to come and see him. Surprisingly, he let me come. I apologized fully, with no excuses, for treating him the way I had in that phone conversation. He listened and then with a biting voice said, "It's about time you came." Again, I almost lost it.

God and I had a great struggle right then and there. I wanted so badly to lambaste him again for his part in this whole sordid affair. But on the way over God reminded me of His Word that I was only responsible for my actions and not the other man's. He was God's business not mine. I have continued to hold out an olive branch but as of yet it has not been received. That too is God's business.

The possibilities of "kingdom living" are so much greater than merely obeying the letter of the law. And it finally comes down to a decision—do we want to live a kingdom lifestyle? Do we want to act toward others in a forgiving and reconciling way? Are we willing? No words can make us want to live that way. Only grace can do that. The King's laws drive us to grace and then grace calls us to the King's laws. Please don't attempt to live by the King's laws without the King's heart.

Oswald Chambers wrote: "The test Jesus gives is not just to determine the truth of our manner but the temper of our mind. Many of us are wonderfully truthful in manner but our temper of mind is rotten in God's sight. What Jesus alters is the temper of mind...We have to fulfill the law, and the only way it can be done is by letting Jesus alter us within, and by remembering that everything He tells us to

do we can do. The whole point of our Lord's teaching is, 'Obey Me, and you will find you have a wealth of power within'.¹⁰

End Notes

¹ Denver Post, Nov. 2001

² Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, p. 146

³ Fredrick Bruner, *The ChristBook*, p. 175

⁴ Dallas Willard, p. 150

⁵ Fredrick Bruner, *The ChristBook*, p. 177

⁶ Chrysostom 1:15:7

⁷ Johann Arnold, *Seventy Times Seven*, p. 48-49

⁸ Fredrick Bruner, *The ChristBook*, p. 178

⁹ Ibid, p.178

¹⁰ Oswald Chambers, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, p. 33

Chapter Five

Kingdom Living—Radical Purity Matthew 5:27-30

She was in the University library when she first felt his eyes. She hadn't noticed him when she sat down. But as she began to read she had the sense that someone was looking at her—it was as if she could feel it. She glanced up to see an average looking guy sitting one table to her right and when she did he looked away. She looked back to her book but soon she felt it again. This time she tried to look without looking by using her peripheral vision, and found he was staring.

It felt so uncomfortable that she moved but before long she felt it again and turning to her left, there he was again—just looking—this time more boldly. As his eyes traced the lines of her body, she felt absolutely violated. It was insulting, dehumanizing, and even threatening. She gathered up her books and quickly left the library watching to see that she wasn't followed.

Jesus said in Matthew 5:27-28, *"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."*

At least among Christians, and even among most people, the physical act of adultery is thought of as wrong. Most people don't have sufficient understanding of why it is wrong, how it is a violation of everything human and holy, but at least they still think it is wrong. But how about the second part of what Jesus said? Do we think He was serious? Do we really believe what He said? We don't want

to. We want to think He was exaggerating. We want to think that if we avoid the physical act of adultery we are okay.

Jesus' words fly in the face of the lies of the world and the lies of our own desires. We call it freedom to be able to indulge our sexual desires and we call it prudery and repression to curb our sexual desires in any way. Hedonism is its technical name—the philosophy that I have the right to pleasure. If anything is not providing me pleasure then I have the right to change it because my pleasure (usually called "happiness") is the highest value.

"But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

The appetite for sex is enormously out of proportion to its proper function partly because it is stimulated so much by our culture. C.S. Lewis wrote, "The biological purpose of sex is children, just as the biological purpose of eating is to repair the body. Now if we eat whenever we feel inclined and just as much as we want, it is quite likely that most of us will eat too much: but not terrifically too much. One man may eat enough for two, but he does not eat enough for ten. The appetite goes a little beyond its biological purpose, but not enormously. But if a healthy young man indulged his sexual appetite whenever he felt inclined, and if each act produced a baby, then in ten years he might easily populate a small village. This appetite is in ludicrous and preposterous excess of its function.

"Or take it another way. You can get a large audience together for a 'strip-tease' act. Now suppose you came to a country where you could fill a theatre by simply bringing a covered plate onto the stage and then slowly lifting the

cover so as to let everyone see, just before the lights went out, that it contained a steak or a bit of bacon. Would you not think that in that country something had gone terribly wrong with the appetite for food? (Likewise) would not anyone who had grown up in a different world think there was something equally odd about the state of the sex instinct among us?"¹

Isn't it at least interesting that the first two issues Jesus addresses in the Sermon on the Mount are the very two issues that are so pervasive in our world and cause so much human suffering: violence and sex? The first issue Jesus addressed was murder/anger and now the second one He addresses is the perversion, the misuse or abuse, of sex. But before we continue with the theme, it is important to place it in its context. As we saw earlier, to show the contrast between the old way of living and the new way, Jesus illustrates with six situations.

Situation	The Old Way	The New Way
Irritation with others	NO murder	Forgiveness and reconciliation
Sexual Attraction	NO intercourse	Love instead of Lust
Unhappy with marriage	Divorce	NO divorce
Wanting to be believed	Make vow to convince	Truth with integrity
Personally injured	Retaliation	Help the one who injured you
You have an enemy	Hate	Love and bless them

And so the King, Jesus, calls His Kingdom people to a wholly different lifestyle.

In Matthew, Jesus said, *"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."*(5:27-30)

Jesus begins by quoting from the Old Testament law, specifically from the 7th commandment: *"You shall not commit adultery."* (Exodus 20:14) He and everyone listening to Him knew full well what the Biblical penalty was for adultery: *"If a man is found sleeping with another man's wife, both the man who slept with her and the woman must die. You must purge the evil from Israel."*(Deuteronomy 22:22)

People felt self-righteous on this 7th commandment as long as they had not had an overt physical affair. They had kept the law. But Jesus, the author of the Law, interprets the law (significantly) more broadly. He says in verse 28, "But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." "Looks at a woman lustfully" means to desire having her sexually. The word "lust" conveys the sensuality of the issue but not the idea of possession. In this "look" there is total disregard for the person (either the woman or her husband) and a fixation only on a desire to have for one's own sexual pleasure.

This look is not casual but persistent, the desire is not involuntary or momentary but cherished."² This look is a "staring at a woman in order to lust after her"³ It is "the leering look"⁴ This "looking" is not a passing glance but a thought-filled continuing "looking." Looking at a beautiful person is a natural drive built in at creation. And in fact there is some element of desire built into that. But staring or leering is a drive built in by the "fall" from creation. This is a looking in order to, for the purpose of, lust.

Acknowledge our sin, ask God's forgiveness, and seek to live a kingdom lifestyle in this matter of sex.

In such staring "the other person is no longer really a unique human being; he or she is now simply kindling for our fire, a thing, a way for us to enjoy ourselves, to feel our power. This "looking" goes beyond seeing like resentment goes beyond irritation or theft goes beyond admiration."⁵ Again, Jesus is not condemning "seeing" as if we can't even see or imagine a naked body. "The New Testament does not equate temptation with sin...sin begins at the point of consent, not with temptation itself and not first in the overt act."⁶ Martin Luther wrote, "We should not make the bowstring too taut here, as if anyone who is tempted... would be damned for it...If an evil thought is involuntary it is not a mortal sin. It is impossible to keep the devil from shooting evil thoughts and lusts into your heart. But see to it that you do not let such arrows stick there and take root, but tear them out and throw them away. Do what one of the ancient fathers counseled long ago: 'I cannot keep a bird from flying over my head. But I can certainly keep it from nesting in my hair'."⁷

It is true that in the Law the specifics of adultery included a married person. And so, yes, there were people who tried to rationalize by thinking, "Since 'adultery' refers technically to a man's affair with a married woman, does it mean that it is not adultery if the woman is single?" Likewise with Jesus' broader interpretation there might be some who would think, "Is it only men who can lust?" Or "Is it not adultery if I'm not married?" "Is it not adultery if I don't know the person I'm imagining or if it's just a picture in a magazine, on the Internet or in a movie?" That is all called "casuistry": Excessively subtle reasoning intended to rationalize or mislead. Foolish is the single or married person who does not understand the implication for all sexuality—an implication that is stated explicitly in other New Testament passages such as I Corinthians 6: *"But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."*

Adulterers By Jesus' Standard

I think we respond to that in one of two ways. We don't like it. We don't want to be considered as bad as those who actually commit physical adultery and so we just "flat-out" ignore His teaching. But that won't change the truth that we are guilty and stand condemned before a holy God as surely as the others. The other way of responding is to acknowledge our sin, ask God's forgiveness, and seek to live a kingdom lifestyle in this matter of sex. So what are we to do to live a kingdom lifestyle? How do avoid this pandemic and systemic affliction of lust?

Read Jesus' words in Matthew 5:29-30:

"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."

How's that for strong language? You can only imagine how those words have been abused through the years. If Jesus meant that in a woodenly literal way, all God's people would go to heaven as mutilated blobs. Obviously, as I just did, so Jesus here is using hyperbole or exaggeration, to make His point. But what is His point? I believe there are two equally important issues Jesus here illustrates: One is how ruthless we must be in controlling ourselves. And the second is the absurdity of thinking we can control sin only by stronger and stronger methods of self-control.

It is absurd to think we can control sin only by stronger and stronger methods of self-control.

At first glance those two appear contradictory. We are to control ourselves but controlling ourselves is fruitless. Given the context of the entire Sermon on the Mount and the rest of Scripture, which authorship is superintended by the same God, I think Jesus is pointing out both truths. Let me explain.

It seems to me that Jesus quite clearly calls us to be ruthless in our efforts to stop our lustful/adulterous ways. Decisive action is called for. Don't think you can break off a dangerous relationship slowly. Don't assume you can look at those videos, movies, and magazines or read those books with no harm done to your soul. The Scriptures are clear:

"Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul."(1 Peter 2:11)

"Train yourself to be godly." Or as the New American Standard Bible translation says it, *"Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness."* (1 Timothy 4:7)

"Flee from sexual immorality." (1 Corinthians 6:18)

"Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness..." (2 Timothy 2:22)

Not all people are tempted to sin in the same way or by the same things. Thus any universal rule about what is appropriate for a believer to see is hopelessly inappropriate. So each believer must ask him/herself "If my eye causes me to sin, don't look. If my hand causes me to sin, don't do it. If my foot causes me to sin, don't go."

Some of us may then need to deliberately stop reading certain literature, watching certain kinds of movies, or going to certain places. Drastic measures are called for. I could go on to write about the things we should avoid as God's kingdom people in order to live a kingdom lifestyle. But you have heard those before and they won't help you one bit if all you are doing is trying harder. Men join accountability groups and make promises to avoid salacious literature, stay off porn sites on the Internet, stop viewing titillating movies and whatever else might tempt them. And for a while they control themselves by removing the obvious temptations.

But then opportunity comes along in the form of a woman at work who always stands just a little too close or a neighbor girl who isn't careful about the way she dresses, or working in a convenience store with pornography readily available, our minds imagine all kinds of things. I have no idea what triggers it for women, but you women and older girls know.

And we find that for all the controls so carefully constructed around us, when opportunity came, our hearts hadn't changed. We controlled our evil hearts for a season but they hadn't changed.

Mark 7:21-23 says, *"For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean'."*

The issue is one of the heart—what would you do if you could get away with it? You can make it impossible to commit physical adultery by mutilating yourself or living as a hermit. You can make it less likely to commit mental adultery by never looking at the opposite sex in person or in pictures. Or like the Taliban we can cover women from head to toe in Burkas. Or maybe we can even demonize the opposite sex—learning to hate them so as not to be tempted. But we just reduce the temptation without ever changing the heart. Or to use Jesus' illustrations, it is absurd to think we can control sin by stronger and stronger methods of self-control. We can gouge out our eyes and cut off our hands but it won't get at the root issue.

Kingdom people aren't just better at keeping the King's laws; they have the King's heart. They don't just stop lust, they learn to love. We need God to change our hearts.

Where the Spirit Comes!

What we need is a whole new relationship between men and women. The problem lies at the root of who we are—we need a transformation, a renewing of our minds by the Spirit. *"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is*

– *his good, pleasing and perfect will.*” (Romans 12:2) The Bible says in Romans 8:13,14, *“For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.”*

I repeat: *“By the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body...”*

Through Christ and by the Spirit we are being transformed so as to bear the likeness for which we were intended at the beginning.

The prophets foretold a day when God would take up residence within His people empowering them to obey in a whole new way. Ezekiel says, *“And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”* (36:27) In the Gospel of John, Jesus spoke excitedly of the transformation this presence of the Spirit would produce in His disciples. Likewise the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, *“And we...are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”* (2 Corinthians 3:18)

One New Testament scholar commented: “The coming of the Spirit has brought the old to an end and has appropriated the work of Christ through whom the effects of the Fall have been radically reversed. Indeed, through Christ and by the Spirit we are being transformed so as to bear the likeness for which we were intended at the beginning. In the freedom that the Spirit provides, we have seen the glory of God himself – as it is made evident to us in the face of our Lord Jesus Christ – and we have come to experience that glory, and will do so in an ever-increasing

way until we come to the final glory."⁸

Jesus has promised something way beyond a more disciplined self-help program when it comes to kingdom living. I am not capable of adequately describing it, but God's promise is that He is supernaturally working within us. And all the self-control in the world cannot by itself overcome a sinful heart. But by the person of His Spirit, Jesus will empower us not just to not lust but change us to love.

And so, I think, Jesus implies, through His "gouged eye"

Knowing his dependence on the Spirit, he is relentless in immediately asking for the Spirit's help in not allowing an evil thought to spin out of control.

and "amputated hand" illustration, that kingdom living is a matter of the "Spirit's" empowerment and "my" response. It is a finely nuanced balance that must not be tipped too far in either direction. It is not our unaided effort, which would be moralism or legalism. Neither is it the Spirit's work apart from our participation, which would be something of a passive "surrender," or "letting go and letting God." Instead it is "dependent action." The Christian must say, "yes" to the Spirit's work in us.

There is very relevant instruction given by the Apostle Paul to his younger protégé Timothy. Knowing the power of sexual temptation, Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 5:2, "*Treat...older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.*" In light of Jesus' teaching, I imagine what Timothy would have done with that instruction. His thinking and actions might have gone something like this:

He starts with recognition that by grace he has been

brought into the King's kingdom—it is love that has wooed him and won him. Love calls forth love. He desires to please his King. He understands that by grace God's Spirit now resides within him to change him and to transform him over time. He knows that his heart has not yet been totally transformed and so he consciously, actively depends on the Spirit to increasingly change his heart as evidenced by his frequent prayers to that end. He guards his heart both positively and negatively:

- Positively by feeding on God's word and being in fellowship with those who want to be like the King.
- Negatively by taking reasonable and practical steps to reduce the temptation—he doesn't spend inordinate time alone with women other than his wife; he is careful about what he looks at or reads.

Knowing his dependence on the Spirit, he is relentless in immediately asking for the Spirit's help in not allowing an evil thought to spin out of control. And when he fails, he immediately invites, and by faith receives, God's forgiveness and restoration. He invites the Spirit's help in aggressively thinking of each woman with whom he deals as a mother or sister whom he loves and desires only what is best for her. And Timothy expects the Spirit of God to transform his heart as he trusts and obeys.

I wish it were easier than that! If God wants me to be different, why doesn't He just take all those evil desires away in one fell swoop? Why doesn't He just give me a completely transformed heart right now? The biggest part of the answer is "I don't know." What I do know is that the Bible says God will use our lifetime to train us in righteousness, until we *"become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."*

End Notes

- ¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 75
- ² A. B. Bruce, *Expositor's Greek Testament*, Vol. 1, p. 108
- ³ Fredrick Bruner, *The ChristBook*, p. 183
- ⁴ Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew*, p. 88
- ⁵ Fredrick Bruner, *The ChristBook*, p. 183
- ⁶ F. Stagg, *Broadman Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8, p. 109 on Matthew
- ⁷ Martin Luther, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 88
- ⁸ Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Spirit*, p. 319

Chapter Six

Kingdom Living—Commitment in Marriage Matthew 5:31-32

She came to see me because she wanted to know if she would be disobedient to God if she divorced her husband. For five years she had done everything she knew to do in attempting to reconcile the marriage. Over five years before, he had moved to the basement. He refused to work, refused to participate in any way with the family, refused to contribute any financial support, and even refused to talk. She did not believe he had ever committed adultery and he had taken no action to divorce her. If we were to have an open debate right now on what the best counsel to this woman would be, I dare say we would have a donnybrook—the differences would be pronounced and the emotional heat intense.

Consider another scenario: The elders of a church are so concerned about the number of divorces among the members that they decide they need a policy regarding marriage, divorce, remarriage and church discipline. One elder quotes Malachi wherein God says He hates divorce. Another cites Jesus from the Gospel of Mark wherein divorce and remarriage constitute adultery. Still another remembers that Jesus made an exception in Matthew when He said no divorce unless there had been marital unfaithfulness. And yet another elder reminded everyone of one more exception that Paul makes in 1 Corinthians wherein divorce was allowed when an unbelieving spouse deserted the marriage.

The debate became even livelier when one elder said divorce might be permitted under limited circumstances but

never remarriage. The debate continued and months later there still was no policy. Jesus said in 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."*

She came to see me because she wanted to know if she would be disobedient to God if she divorced her husband.

This is a chapter that may offend some people. It will be too legal for libertarians and too much liberty for legalists. It will frighten those who need law not liberty to control themselves and others. It will anger some because it threatens their cherished views. It will anger others because it indicts their actions. And in the middle of it all are those who have or are actually experiencing divorce. There is probably no greater unhappiness than the unhappiness of a marriage that is failing. And no greater disappointment than the disappointment of a love that failed. We cannot speak of divorce in a coldly clinical manner. Divorce touches real people in the deepest and most painful ways.

And so I am reminded as I remind you that Jesus' words are spoken in the context of good news. He speaks not to wound but to heal. He speaks not to condemn but to give life. He is calling us to Kingdom Living. In the verses preceding this text, He said it is not just a matter of not committing physical adultery, but not even lusting because kingdom people are called to real love. Now in these verses He says it is not just a matter of a correct divorce; kingdom people are called to committed marriage. This will be unsatisfying to some if we don't declare some position on

when or if divorce and/or remarriage is Biblically legitimate. But the text here in verses 31 and 32 is not about the technical grounds for divorce—that is not Jesus’ concern. Oh, but it is ours. We are so prone to “old” thinking that our greatest concern in passages like this is to find out where the line is so we can know when divorce is “permissible” and when it isn’t. We want to find the legal loopholes that will allow us to get out of our commitment to marriage or we want to find the fine point of the law that will help us know how to judge another person’s actions.

We are so prone to “old” thinking that our greatest concern in passages like this is to find out where the line is so we can know when divorce is “permissible” and when it isn’t.

By Jesus’ day, and certainly in our day, the “letter” of the law was sought so that they could find out exactly how far they could go without crossing the line into sin. If divorce happened for one reason it would be wrong but if for another reason, then it was okay. That is precisely what Jesus is here rejecting! His call is to a wholly different way of thinking. Look again at what He says in Matthew 5:31-32 and see the contrast: *“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.”*

When Jesus said, “It has been said” He was referring to Deuteronomy 24:1-4 where we read, *“If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a*

certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD."

Three things this law declared:

- Divorce was only allowed if "something indecent" was found out.
- If something "indecent" was found, and he wished to divorce her, then he had to give her a "certificate of divorce" making the divorce legal and possible for another to marry her.
- A man could not take his twice-divorced wife back.

The Old Testament law didn't demand divorce but clearly the law controlled it. Moses understood that divorce and remarriage would happen but it was severely restricted.

Now in Jesus' day the religious leaders were divided into two schools of interpretation regarding the legitimate grounds for divorce and remarriage based on this passage in the law. One school of thought said it was permissible only in the case of adultery while the other school said it was for any good cause (which practically meant any reason). One school emphasized one word in the law and the other school another word to arrive at their interpretations.

Based on the word "indecent" in Deuteronomy 24, the rabbis of one sect wrote: A man may not divorce his wife unless he has found unchastity in her, for it is written, 'Because he has found in her indecency in something.' This school in fact required divorce in cases of sexual

indecencies. Based on the word “something” in Deuteronomy 24, the rabbis of another sect wrote: ‘He may divorce her even if she spoiled a dish for him, for it is written, ‘Because he has found in her indecency in something (interpreted to mean “anything”).

Still a third group picked up on different words in the law that allowed for even a more lenient interpretation. R. Akiba says, Divorce is permitted, “even if he found another fairer than she, for it is written, If a man marries `a woman who becomes displeasing to him ...¹ But Jesus rejects this kind of legalistic nitpicking. The King doesn’t want His people focused on the technicalities of when a divorce is or isn’t warranted. He wants them to stop divorcing. A kingdom mind doesn’t focus on the legal limitations of divorce but on a commitment in marriage.

Matthew 5:31-32 says, *“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.”*

Yes, Jesus mentions an exception but that is not His point. His point is that instead of obsessing about when divorce is appropriate, understand that divorce is not the “kingdom” way. I must be very careful here. I’m not saying divorced people can’t be part of the kingdom—Jesus makes it very clear that they can and are. I’m simply trying to make the same emphasis Jesus does—just like resentment and lust (the first two situations He mentions) do not fit in the kingdom, so neither does divorce.

But because we do obsess about the technicalities of when a divorce and/or remarriage is appropriate I need to spend a little time on what Jesus is not saying in this verse before

going back to what He is saying.

1. He is not saying divorce is never appropriate. Under certain circumstances, divorce may well be the right thing. Between the words of Jesus in Matthew, here and in chapter 19, and Paul in 1 Corinthians, exceptions to “no divorce” clearly exist.

2. He is not saying that any woman whose husband divorces her is a literal adulteress. The words “causes her to become an adulteress” are difficult words to understand at first. Isn’t this just adding insult to injury? He divorces her and she is called an adulteress? Some try to explain this by suggesting that Jesus means she (the innocent party) commits adultery if she remarries. But it is not certain that remarriage would occur and Jesus does not even mention remarriage as the issue here, just divorce.

A kingdom mind doesn't focus on the legal limitations of divorce but on a commitment in marriage.

Some expositors make note of the passive voice used in the original language and would translate the phrase this way: “the divorcing husband makes the wife suffer adultery, or the wife is exposed to adultery.” She has become the victim of an adulterous act—the breaking of faith in the marriage. This, I believe, is correct and is confirmed when Jesus lays the blame not on the wife but on the divorcing husband when He says that the husband “causes” this.

3. Jesus is not saying that physical adultery is the only “ground” for divorce. It is at least interesting, and I

think instructive, that He didn't use the specific word for physical adultery that He had just been using. When discussing the exception when divorce may legitimately occur, He uses the term that is translated "marital unfaithfulness." This is a phrase that translates a word that includes an unspecified, but broad range of sexual sin. The range includes:

- An act of physical adultery.
- Unfaithfulness during the engagement or betrothal.
- Incest – husband and wife were later discovered to be blood relatives.
- Repeated and unrepented unfaithfulness.

Forgiveness of sins operates only in the repentant and nowhere else. But in the repentant, forgiveness of sins does operate and mightily so.

Frankly, good and godly Bible scholars differ greatly on what is meant by "marital unfaithfulness." But they at least agree that it means some sexual sin that violates the covenant relationship of marriage. I think it is incorrect to try to limit it to physical adultery. We must at least remember that Paul, writing with the authority of Jesus, indicates another exception in 1 Corinthians 7. Therefore it is reasonable to understand that both Jesus and Paul knew there were exceptions to "no divorce." Jesus is not saying that divorce is never appropriate, He is not saying that when a man divorces his wife she literally becomes an adulteress, and He is not saying that physical adultery is the only ground for divorce.

Dr. Craig Blomberg, a recognized evangelical scholar and known to many of us, has written: "Jesus forbids divorce and remarriage, except when sexual sin intrudes. Then

both divorce and remarriage are permitted, though neither is ever required. Restoration always remains preferable. Infidelity does not, in and of itself, dissolve the marriage covenant, but it does introduce so serious a breach that sometimes relationships prove irreparable."²

CEB Cranfield writes, "For the church rigidly to refuse to solemnize the remarriage of a divorced person who has accepted God's forgiveness and at the same time God's judgment upon his or her life, who is sincerely penitent... and sincerely desirous...to order his or her life as nearly as possible to God's will, would seem to me to involve a denial of the reality of the forgiveness of sins and therefore of the gospel of Jesus Christ itself."³ Is not the Scripture in such passages as Luke 7, John 4, John 8, and others declaring the forgiveness of just such sins as we are so prone to find unforgivable? Fredrick Bruner wrote, "Forgiveness of sins operates only in the repentant and nowhere else. But in the repentant, forgiveness of sins does operate and mightily so."⁴ You and I both stake our eternal future on that truth!

What is Jesus saying?

Jesus is calling "kingdom" people to a higher standard. In Matthew 19, a much longer passage on the same subject, Jesus does the same thing He does in chapter 5. Read it here carefully:

"Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?' (Quite obviously referring again to the passage in Deuteronomy 24.)

'Haven't you read,' Jesus replied, 'that at the beginning the Creator "made them male and female," and said, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh"? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has

joined together, let man not separate.

'Why then,' they asked, 'did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?'

'Jesus replied, 'Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.'

***Jesus' point is that a committed marriage
is what He calls us to and divorce
is the last resort.***

"The disciples said to him, 'If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry'."

(Matthew 19:1-10)

Here as in Matthew 5, Jesus' concern is not with divorce but with marriage. I think the disciples' response is our best key to understanding Jesus' intent. Jesus was calling them to a much higher standard that they thought possible. In essence they said, "If we can't divorce our wives, how could we ever dare to get married?"

The disciples had been reared in the same culture as the Pharisees who asked Jesus the question about divorce. They thought that divorce was the way you handled disagreement and hard times in a marriage. They quite obviously heard Jesus to be saying that "kingdom people" didn't do that. Kingdom people didn't get divorced. Again Jesus notes the exception but His point is that a committed marriage is what He calls us to and divorce is the last resort.

He makes it clear that marriage was instituted by God ("God made them male and female") and monitored by God ("What God has joined together let man not separate"). Haddon Robinson wrote, "Society did not invent marriage, they received it."⁵

Kingdom Commitment Marriage

Marriage is not a business partnership that can be broken when either party thinks the arrangement is unfair or unsatisfying. God said marriage is a union that creates one out of two. It is not our love that keeps a marriage alive but God's institution of marriage that keeps love alive. It is not until "lack of love do us part" but "until death do us part."

Jesus does not want His kingdom people to become legalists about when divorce is legitimate; instead He wants them to see and experience the possibilities of a committed marriage. Read one author's description of that kind of marriage:

"That there should exist one other person in the world toward whom all openness of exchange should establish itself, from whom there should be no concealment; whose body should be as dear to one, in every part, as one's own; with whom there should be no sense of mine or thine, in property or possession; into whose mind one's thoughts should naturally flow, as it were to know themselves and receive a new illumination; and between whom and oneself there should be a spontaneous rebound of sympathy in all the joys and sorrows and experiences of life; such is perhaps one of the dearest wishes of the soul."⁶

And God knows such a relationship exists only in the context of commitment for life. Jesus wants His people to stop looking at divorce and look instead at marriage. He

calls them to full commitment. A superb writer, Elizabeth Actemeier has written: "Christian marriage is a committed marriage—an unreserved dedication of one's whole self to the relationship. When Christians marry they say to each other, in effect, 'We are going to maintain this marital union, no matter what.' They promise each other: 'I will be with you no matter what happens to us and between us. If you should become blind tomorrow, I will be there. If you achieve no success and attain no status in our society, I will be there. When we argue and are angry, as we inevitably will, I will work to bring us together... When our marriage seems utterly sterile and going nowhere at all, I will believe that it can work and I will want it to work, and I will do my part to make it work. And when all is wonderful and we are happy, I will rejoice over our life together, and continue to strive to keep our relationship strong and growing.'"7 That is what a "Kingdom" commitment marriage is about.

Christian marriage is a committed marriage – an unreserved dedication of one's whole self to the relationship.

I think the disciples' response indicates another crucial matter in this kind of kingdom living. They thought it would be impossible to live in such a way. But as I have noted over and over again in this series, Jesus calls His people to a lifestyle made possible by His grace. Such a commitment in marriage maintained through financial failures, sickness and even unfaithfulness, as well as the accumulation of daily irritations, is possible when we look to God's Spirit to give us the will and the ability.

I'm not at liberty to tell you about some of the powerful ways I have seen God work in the marriages in my church. Impossible situations turned around by grace. Rock-

stubborn hearts made soft by God's Spirit. "No-hope" marriages restored. All, as men (especially men) and women respond to God's grace. It's all of grace. A conscious reliance on God's Spirit in us is the way of "kingdom" living.

Last week a member of my church wrote the following to me:

"I'm so excited about this series on Kingdom living. In each sermon certain phrases have leapt into my mind, or my spirit, and have brought light and joy. One I keep saying over and over to myself is, 'Obedience does not earn grace. Grace empowers obedience.' And 'It doesn't require some standard of behavior for Jesus to accept us. He accepts us just as we are. He gives us His grace just as we are.'

"And my thought is, Yes, if He withheld His grace until we reached a certain standard, then how in the world do we REACH the standard in the first place? Especially since it is His grace that enables us to change. I'd never seen that before. Lights have been going on in my heart and mind. It is all becoming clearer.

"When I get mad at God because it all has seemed so hard to do, then I walk away in agony of heart saying, 'Forget You!' What I really mean is, 'Please want me for your kingdom. Don't throw me away. Because deep down I do want You, God. I need You. I can't do anything without You. Please don't give up on me. I'll do better next time.'

"Oh, but those last words are dangerous – 'I'll do better next time'? I won't do it better next time. I can't. I need His grace. I need to admit my helplessness, so that He can impart His strength, His grace to me.... He says to me, 'Hey, it's okay. I know you can't do it. I know all about that. I know all the times you've tried and failed. I know that you think you are a failure at this point. It's okay to be a failure. Now come and sit by Me and let me give you My strength

and ability. Let Me put My law into your heart so that walking in love, the law of the kingdom, is your desire’.”

The possibilities of “kingdom” living in marriage rise far above the technicalities of when divorce is permissible. Jesus calls us to committed marriage. And by His Spirit, He will enable us.

End Notes

¹ Gittin 9:10, from the Mishna, p. 321

² Craig Blomberg, *Trinity Journal*, No.11, 1990 p. 181-2

³ CEB Cranfield, *The Bible and Christian Life*, p. 223f

⁴ Fredrick Bruner, *The ChristBook*, p.685

⁵ Hadden Robinson, *What Jesus Said About Successful Living: Principles from the Sermon on the Mount*, p. 148

⁶ Edward Carpenter, quoted in Mace, *Whom God hath Joined*, p. 26-27

⁷ Elizabeth Actemeier, *The Committed Marriage*, p. 41

Chapter Seven

Kingdom Living—Telling the Truth Matthew 5:33-37

100 years ago Mark Twain wrote, "I (was explaining to a friend recently), how I got out of an embarrassing (situation) in Austria last year by telling a modified lie. I don't know what might have become of me if I hadn't happened to remember to tell the police that I belonged to the same family as the Prince of Wales. That made everything pleasant, and they let me go; and apologized, too and were ever so kind... and hoped that I would let bygones be bygones and not say anything about it."

My friend said, "You call it a modified lie? Where is the modification?"

I explained that it lay in the form of my statement to the police. I didn't say I belonged to the royal family: I only said I belonged to the same family as the Prince of Wales – meaning the human family, of course, and if those people had any (sense) they would have known it. I can't go around furnishing brains to the police.

(My friend asked how (I felt) after that performance? (I said,) "Well, of course I was distressed to find that the police misunderstood me, but as long as I had not told a lie I knew there was no (reason) to sit up nights and worry about it."¹ Clever! And we do it all the time.

A friend of mine told me of a time when a customer gave him several delicious looking steaks for grilling. But when they were cooked they were so tough they were literally impossible to eat. When he discussed with his wife what to say when asked about the meat, my friend decided to say, "Steaks like that don't stay around our house very long." Clever and even funny and we do it all the time.

Can you even imagine life without deceit? Many cannot. David Nyberg, professor at NY State University in his book *The Varnished Truth* wrote: "Deception is not merely to be tolerated as an occasionally prudent aberration in a world of truth telling: it is rather an essential component in our ability to organize and shape the world, to resolve problems of coordination among individuals who differ, to cope with uncertainty and pain, to be civil and to achieve privacy as needed, to survive as a species, and to flourish as persons."² He said telling the truth has been morally overrated.³

Deception is an essential component in our ability to organize and shape the world.

Jesus said, in 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."

Is Jesus serious? Is life without at least some deceit even possible? Jesus came announcing the good news of the kingdom of heaven. That does not mean He came only to tell people how to get to heaven when they die. As we have seen earlier in this passage, Jesus came with the great news that by faith in His grace we could become part of His kingdom **now**.

So what is the Kingdom living issue in verses 33-37? Jesus

says when put in a situation where being totally honest with someone may cost us, “kingdom people” don’t lie; we speak the truth! Imagine being a person and living among people who spoke only the truth. Frankly we can’t quite imagine it—we’re so warped, so conditioned by deceit as a lubricant in social life, that we are rather fearful of total honesty.

Jesus’ words are certainly neither a command nor an excuse for rudeness when you wife asks what you think of her new dress. To those who want to object to the requirement of “total” honesty, I quickly add, “Understand that Jesus is not saying we have to say everything we know or think every time we speak to someone. Again, Jesus is not calling us to rudeness or an open expression of our own sinful thoughts but to honesty instead of deceit.

Earlier I introduced the word “casuistry” to you. Casuistry is excessively subtle reasoning intended to rationalize or mislead. The religious leaders of Jesus’ day were very good at it and we’ve only gotten better. People of Jesus’ day knew well what God’s word said about being truthful. Matthew 5:33 says, *“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.’”*

When Jesus reminded them in verse 33 *“Do not break your oath...”* He was speaking of their honesty. When they affirmed or denied something, their words must represent the truth. When Jesus reminded them in the next phrase in verse 33 to, *“keep the oaths you have made to the Lord”* He was speaking of their faithfulness. If they said they would do something, they were to do it.

That seems fairly straightforward. But what had people done with such instruction to be truthful? With excessively

subtle reasoning they determined that only those statements made with an oath had to be truthful. And then they took it further and said only oaths taken in God's name had to be truthful. And they even got so technical that they defined what constituted using God's name.

Jesus said in verse 34-36, *"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.'"*

Apparently they had this system worked out to where they felt that if they swore by heaven or earth or Jerusalem or by their own lives but didn't say "God" then they weren't bound to what they said.

Jesus says when put in a situation where being totally honest with someone may cost us, "kingdom people" don't lie; we speak the truth!

The Mishna is the Jewish code of law and it has one whole section given to when oaths are binding and when they are not. The rabbis had turned truthfulness into a matter of *prepositions*. One rabbi said that if you swear *by* Jerusalem you weren't bound to what you said, but if you swear *toward* Jerusalem you were. An oath is usually taken in order to give the impression that you really intend to keep your word on the matter. "I'll do it so help me God." "I swear on a stack of Bibles, I'll be there." But in Jesus' day with the technical distinctions between them, oaths were often taken as a way to subtly evade having to keep your word.

Jesus considered all of this casuistry to be utterly ridiculous. No matter how they worded it, or how they meant it, God was their witness because heaven is His throne, the earth is His footstool, Jerusalem is His and even your life, right down to the color of your hair, is under God's control. God

The Bible indicates that the reason why we feel guilty, is because we are guilty!

is witness to every word that comes from our mouths—there are no exceptions.

Our casuistry is no less ridiculous: As children we said, "I don't have to do it because I didn't cross my heart and hope to die." Or "I had my fingers crossed behind my back." Or as we got a little older, "Son did you chop down the cherry tree with the big ax?"

"No father" (and then under our breath) "not with the big ax."

Or as we got older yet, "I didn't actually sign the contract." Or "It was in the fine-print that apparently you didn't read." Or it is in half-truths that masquerade as truths.

He forced himself up at the sound of the alarm but as he sat on the edge of the bed he thought: *"You know, you really need to sleep a little longer."*

"But I can't. I was late yesterday and I was sick two days last week. It won't look good."

"But you had to work late last night. They should have a little mercy."

"But the boss will be angry. He was there last night also and you can bet he'll be there early this morning."

"Maybe you can find a legitimate excuse. You need to stop at the doctor's office to pick up that information. You could call in and say you have to go to the doctor. That's legitimate."

"Yes, but my reason is because I want to sleep a little longer. I'm not sure that's kosher."

"Sure it is. People come late to work all the time because of doctor's appointments."

"Well, I am very tired and I probably wouldn't get much done this morning anyway."

"That's right. You don't even need an appointment—just stop by the doctor's office on your way in to work later."

At 8:15 he called his office to tell them he had a doctor's appointment. He got another hour of sleep and then he stopped at the doctor's on the way to work.

At Jesus' trial, Pilate asked: "What is truth?" Philosophers and college freshmen have debated it for centuries. But it's really not so hard. Truth is an exact correspondence between what you say and what you do. Truth is whatever is consistent with reality. Augustine wrote that truth is the affirmation of what is. (Three times three equals nine.) Defined in the French Jerusalem Bible it is:

Veracity – it is when your "yes" means "yes" and your "no" means "no."

Sincerity – when the "yes" or "no" of your mouth correspond to the "yes" or "no" of your real intentions.

Solemnity – when your plain "yes" or "no" are as solemn as if attached to an oath.⁴

And what is a lie? We say children don't tell lies; they tell stories or fibs. As we get older we make a distinction between a little white lie and a "whopper" of a lie. Much older and sitting in a committee meeting we might call it "constructive revision." The former head of the Civil Service Administration of Great Britain refused to admit in court that what he had written contained a lie. He did admit to a

misleading impression and later in that same testimony to "being economical with the truth."⁵

But what is a lie really? That too, is not so hard! Very simply it is the opposite of the truth. Jesus said in John 8:55, *"I know (the Father). If I said I did not, I would be a liar."* Moses wrote in Genesis 18:13-15 *"Why did Sarah laugh...? ...She lied and said, 'I did not laugh'."*

Sociologist J.A. Barnes said a lie is "a statement intended to

Any communication, verbal or non-verbal, intended to deceive is a lie.

deceive someone about the state of (things), including the intentions and attitudes of the liar."⁶ Any communication, verbal or non-verbal, intended to deceive is a lie. God reminds us of how He feels about lying in both the Old Testament and the New Testament:

"There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers." (Proverbs 6:16-19)

"But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars – their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur." (Revelation 21:8)

Or as my young children would occasionally yell at each other, "Liars go to hell!" That may have been unkind but it wasn't bad theology.

No, it is not that hard to know what lying and truth are. But we know it is very hard to consistently tell the truth. Deceit is a part of our culture. Distortion of truth is everywhere in

our society. Tax returns, in some places in the justice system, spin doctors, much political speech, much, maybe most, advertising, and it is even the basis of much of what we call humor—just watch any of the sit-coms on television. Deceit is woven into everything we see, hear and do. We expect it and we use it. We only get anxious about it when we are the victims of it.

We distort the truth—we tell lies—when we fear, when we fear that others will take advantage of us, or hurt us, or won't value us as much as we think we are to be valued. How many of us speak with a slant to our stories to make our point more emphatically or to present ourselves as more knowledgeable, more clever, more caring, more generous, or whatever.

George Macdonald wrote: "I always try—I think I do—to be truthful. All the same I tell a great many lies, e.g. things that mean one thing to myself though another to other people. But I do not think lightly of it. Where I am more often wrong is in tacitly pretending to hear things I do not, especially jokes and good stories, the point of which I always miss; but seeing everyone laugh, I laugh too, for the sake of not looking a fool. My respect for the world's opinion is my greatest stumbling block I fear."⁷ And so with a deceitful culture and deceitful hearts we are greatly tempted to try to distinguish one kind of lie from another. But Jesus' emphasis is not on subtle distinctions.

Earlier we saw that Jesus' emphasis was not on the technicalities of divorce but on committed marriage. Likewise now Jesus rejects subtle distinctions between what is and is not a lie and calls His kingdom people to truth—just truth. Verse 37 says, "*Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.*"

Truth matters!

The Scripture says in Titus 1:2, *"God...does not lie."* Using "light" as a metaphor for truth, the apostle John wrote in 1 John 1:5-7, *"...God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another..."*

Why do we care about truth? We live today among those who say truth doesn't matter. We live among many who think there is no "truth." They say everything is a matter of interpretation and context and language all shrouded in subjectivity so that nothing is truly knowable with certainty. Others would say, "Since different people hold different opinions, there is no reason why my opinions should be better or more valid than anyone else's." But this leads to thinking that since conflicting "truths" can't all be true they must all be phony which in turn leads to cynicism or despair.

Into the plethora of competing philosophies in our world, Jesus came as truth incarnate, ultimate reality, truth in the flesh. Everything else may be transient and obscure but He is the light, He is the way, He is God, and He is truth. His life was without sin, His words were without guile, His love was without limit and the desperate flocked to Him like moths to a yard light—because for the first time they had contact with something that wasn't transient or obscure, but was solid and perfectly trustworthy.

We who are citizens of the kingdom of heaven are to reflect that reality now. We live in a world and in relationships clouded with deceit. Most people live in a false-reality,

acting as if this life is all there is and using every means available, including deceit, to get all they can get. And everyone becomes more and more cynical until they see truth lived out—until they see relationships where truth in love reigns rather than deceit in selfishness—until they see Jesus’ life lived out in us. Living the truth means to embody what is real through our words and actions.

Jesus came as truth incarnate, ultimate reality, truth in the flesh.

Jesus calls us to a kingdom lifestyle that demonstrates truth—“Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’” The apostle Paul put it this way in Ephesians 4:22-25, “... *Put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires (and) be made new in the attitude of your minds; and...put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body.*”

A human being in isolation from other humans is unnatural. We were meant to live in relationship with others. A human being in isolation from God is unnatural. We were created to live in relationship with God. Truth is the only basis for such a relationship. Truth about God: truth in Christ and truth in us.

This teaching is not just moralistic. Jesus words are not akin to Aesop’s fables, or *the Book of Virtues* or other moralistic aphorisms. The kind of truth-telling Jesus speaks of requires a change of heart, a Spirit-empowered commitment and practice of truth telling. Not just not lying but telling the truth. Not just repression but expression. Telling the truth with consistency is contrary

to our nature. We don't trust God so we use whatever means necessary to protect ourselves. We think too highly or too little of ourselves so we are forced to compensate by exaggerating our importance through our shading the truth—our lies.

We think too highly or too little of ourselves so we are forced to compensate by exaggerating our importance through our shading the truth—our lies.

Just try living one whole hour without in any way shading the truth. When required to speak, you choose only words consistent with the intent of your heart; no hint of exaggeration or minimization of facts when you pass them along; always careful in representing the remarks of others completely accurately; never intentionally leaving a false impression. To be a person of such absolute integrity is as impossible as being perfect in anything. The better I know myself and human nature, the less surprised I am by evil and the more surprised I am by virtue. I am learning not to be shocked when people lie but to be pleasantly surprised when they tell the truth. That's not cynicism; that's God's appraisal of us without the change He alone can bring by His Spirit. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "The cross is God's truth about us..." We are so fundamentally flawed that only death can change us—and Christ died for us. The rest of the quote from Bonhoeffer is this:

"The cross is God's truth about us, and therefore it is the only power which can make us truthful. When we know the cross we are no longer afraid of the truth."⁸

Jesus expects us to be very serious about this issue of truth telling. But He knows we are incapable without His Spirit's intervention. The Psalmist wrote, "*Surely you desire truth in*

the inner parts... Create in me a pure heart, O God..."(Psalm 51:6,10)

Do we take Jesus seriously? Do we dare to pray that prayer of David's sincerely? Are we willing to be dependent on God's Spirit and determined to be people of truth, nothing but the truth, so help us God?

This is the Kingdom living God calls us to.

End Notes

¹ *The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg and other Stories*, 1902

² David Nyberg, *The Varnished Truth: Truth Telling and Deceiving in Ordinary Life*, p. 5

³ *Ibid*, p. 4

⁴ The French Jerusalem Bible, cited in Fredrick Bruner, *The ChristBook*, p. 205

⁵ F.G. Baily, *The Prevalence of Deceit*, p. 2

⁶ J.A. Barnes, *A Pack of Lies: Toward a Sociology of Lying*, p. 11

⁷ George Macdonald, *Reminiscence of a Specialist*

⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 155

Chapter Eight

Kingdom Living—Beyond Forgiveness Matthew 5:38-48

Friends of mine, who have four young children, are openhearted people. Another young couple, with four children of their own and another soon to be born, came to my friends' church as relatively new believers and with an apparent zeal for God. Shortly thereafter this other young couple let it be known that they needed a place to live until their house was completed in two weeks. My friends, whom I shall re-name David and Melissa, happily offered their finished basement to the homeless family.

Two weeks quickly passed and David and Melissa were increasingly concerned. The guest-dad was always gone and the young mother sat around reading her Bible while her children went unsupervised, literally wrecking the basement—running water ruining the floors while the mother was there but praying. David and Melissa learned that the reason the other family had no home was that they had given theirs away. The baby was born and they had no crib for it because they had given it away just before the baby was born. The woman volunteered that the reason for their generosity was that they were “Sermon on the Mount” kind of people. They said Jesus told them to “Give to the one who asks you and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.” They took Him seriously, she said, and thus they would give anything and everything.

The woman further said that she had the gift of rebuking people and regularly rebuked Melissa for not reading her Bible enough and for not having the same giving attitude

that she and her husband had. My friend, David, loaned a power tool to a neighbor who returned it broken. David indicated he was reluctant to loan another tool to him for which David was roundly rebuked for not being willing to keep loaning until all his tools were broken—after all Jesus said, “if someone wants to take your shirt, give him your coat as well.”

***What does Jesus mean when He says,
"Give to the one who asks you "***

When asked about caring for her own children, the woman said that God promised to take care of them if she would be obedient to read her Bible and pray. After 2½ months of Melissa caring for nine children and her house being abused while the other woman attended Bible studies and read her Bible and prayed, when she was not rebuking Melissa, David and Melissa finally said “enough” and asked them to leave. But Melissa was deeply troubled by the woman’s words. Was this other woman right? Was Melissa unspiritual? Had David and Melissa disobeyed God by not being willing to let them stay there forever? What does Jesus mean when He says, *"Give to the one who asks you and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you?"*

Look at Matthew 5:38 and ask yourself the question, “What does Jesus mean?”

"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. 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. 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."

Strong words, aren't they?

"Don't resist an evil person."

"Love your enemies."

"Be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect."

We previously looked at the first four illustrations of Kingdom living and now look at the last two illustrations. I want us to look at both illustrations together because the one so logically and experientially flows out of the other. In both cases, Jesus introduces the illustrations the same way He has the others: in verses 38 and 43 He says, "*You have heard that it was said...but I tell you...*" He contrasts the way we would normally respond, with the new possibility of responding as a citizen of the kingdom of heaven.

In the first illustration, starting with verse 38, Jesus begins by quoting Old Testament Law, "*You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'*" He is quoting Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy where we read, "*But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.*" (Exodus 21:23-25)

When Jesus next says, "*But I tell you...*" we might think He

is contradicting the Old Testament Law. But Jesus is not contradicting the Law; He is reacting to its abuse.

An “eye for eye and tooth for tooth” kind of justice was and still is necessary. The principle in this kind of justice is that there must be just recompense for injury done to another. This law was not harsh, but actually avoided injustice by checking the wild kind of revenge we usually want—where the response doesn’t fit the offense. But justice was a community matter not a personal one. Justice is not to be determined by an individual but by the state. Jesus is not contradicting community justice; He is contradicting personal revenge. The world lives as if “eye for eye and tooth for tooth” means personal recompense or retaliation. Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn asked his friend Buck, “What is a feud?”

Justice is not to be determined by an individual but by the state.

Buck responded, “Why, where was you raised, Huck? Don’t you know what a feud is? A feud is when one man has a quarrel with another and kills him. Then the other man’s brother kills him. Then the other brothers, on both sides, goes for one another. Then the cousins chip in—and by and by everybody is killed off, and there ain’t no more feud. But it’s kind of slow, and it takes a long time.”¹

Normally we think, “If you kick me then I kick you.” If you do me a favor, then I am indebted to do you a favor. Always equality, never up and never down, always equals. We maintain our pride in this way—we are neither taken advantage of nor beholden to anyone. We keep even. That’s the way it’s done. But Jesus says in verse 39, “*I tell you, do not resist an evil person.*” Please note that Jesus is not commanding that civil authorities disarm or that nations

capitulate to evil. He is not saying governments have no right to resist evil. Again He is speaking against personal revenge. The phrase, "*do not resist*" speaks of not holding court on your own and determining the justice that you need to mete out. Dispensing justice in punishment is not the private Christian's responsibility.

Then what is the "kingdom" person's response to an offense committed against him or her? Look at Jesus' examples. Please note I refer to them as examples. There is nothing to suggest that Jesus here is giving us an exhaustive catalog of proper responses to situations. He is illustrating how a change of attitude might manifest itself.

Insult

In Matthew 5:39b He says, "*If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.*" This "strike" or slap is an insult—it is a right-handed person using the back of his hand to slap the cheek of another. This was not an assault on the body but an insult to the honor. The old rule of retaliation was, if he insults me, I insult him.

It's six-year-olds, "You're a baby!" "No, you're a baby!"

It's fourteen-year-olds, "You're fat!" "And your mother's ugly."

It's forty-year-olds getting cut off in traffic and then getting in front and slowing down.

It's getting cheated out of a place on the team or a portion of a bonus and planning how to get even.

But Jesus says "kingdom" people turn the other cheek. He is not saying that if someone gouges out your right eye you should offer him your left eye. He is not saying we are to be blind to injustice. He Himself recognized the situation as "evil" - He said don't resist an evil person. He's not denying the injustice of the act and He's not asking us to deny

reality. He is asking us to consider our response.

He went on, *"And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic (the long undergarment worn by people in Jesus' day), let him have your cloak (the long outer garment) as well."*

***Jesus is asking us to
consider our response.***

In the examples, Jesus moves from talking about your honor being insulted to your possessions being taken. Jesus is not saying we can't appeal appropriately to government or community for justice. Even the apostle Paul appealed for justice. But revenge or a spirit of retaliation, Jesus says, is out of the question. Here's the way the Apostle Paul said it to the people in Corinth:

"The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers." (1 Corinthians 6:7-8)

Again, we are not being asked to deny reality but to consider our response.

Exploitation

Look at the third example: *"If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles."* This was about being exploited. The Roman army occupied Israel at this time and a soldier had the ability to force an Israelite to carry his gear up to a mile. This was obviously a nuisance but more so, it was degrading for a subjugated people. The powerful could exploit the weak.

- It's a boss who abuses his authority almost forcing you to work longer hours or do tasks that don't fit your job.

- It's a spouse who uses power or position to pressure you to do what you don't want to do.
- It's a coach or a teacher who makes fun of you or is unfair and you are in no position to defend yourself.

Again Jesus is not saying we pretend this is okay. And He is not saying we stand by while others are exploited. He is saying that when we are exploited we are to have a different attitude.

Look at the last example in verse 42 and think about my

A kingdom lifestyle is more the result of an attitude shaped by the Holy Spirit in the midst of ever-changing situations.

friends David and Melissa whom I mentioned earlier, "*Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.*" This addresses the mundane of everyday—those pushy, demanding, undependable people who would take advantage of us.

Augustine notes that we are not told to give whatever someone asks but to whomever asks. You wouldn't hand a gun to a killer. Luther wrote that we don't give to just anybody who happens to have a whim for what we have but we are ready to give to the one who really needs it. Jesus is not asking us to give away everything we have but to give away our self-centeredness that reacts so sharply to any offense.

When we are offended, stolen from, exploited, or taken advantage of, our natural response is to retaliate. And often the offense, when it is great, becomes our whole world—we can think of nothing else and all of life is colored by our drive to get even. Let me repeat something: These examples are not an exhaustive set of new rules by which we must now live as Christians. These are examples of a

new attitude. If I considered the list complete and I took them in a woodenly literal way I might say, "If he strikes me on the right cheek I turn the other to him but if he strikes me on the left cheek then I knock his block off."

True kingdom living is not guided by a set of rules. A kingdom lifestyle, godliness, Christ-likeness, is more the result of an attitude shaped by the Holy Spirit in the midst of ever-changing situations. If we turn Jesus' words into "laws" we will turn His words on their head—and wind up exactly opposite of where He wants us. By human will power alone we can often obey rules, but it takes the supernatural work of God to change the heart, to change our attitudes. We naturally want our idea of justice to guide our relationships, when Jesus wants our love to guide all our relationships.

That leads us to the last of six situations Jesus uses to illustrate a "kingdom" lifestyle. Matthew 5:43-44 reads, *"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..."* Here the situation intensifies from those who occasionally do harm to you or me to those who live to do harm to us—those who consider you or me their enemy. One man said, "Few of us manage to go through life without collecting a group of individuals who would not be sorry to learn that we had died."²

When Jesus said, *"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy'..."* He was not saying that was what the Old Testament taught. Certainly in the Old Testament there are numerous places where God's people are taught to love their neighbor but nowhere are they taught to hate their enemy. Apparently, freedom to hate one's enemy was the popular understanding of people. I'll love nice people, I'll love my own people, and I'll

love those who will love me. I'll get along with those who are like me.

"Believe as I believe, no more, no less;
That I am right, and no one else, confess;
Feel as I feel, think only as I think;
Eat what I eat, and drink but what I drink;
Look as I look, do always as I do;
Then, and only then, will I fellowship with you."³

In contrast, Ramon Narvaez, the nineteenth century Prime Minister of Spain, was dying and was asked by a priest, "Does your Excellency forgive all your enemies?" The Prime Minister replied, "I do not have to forgive my enemies, I have had them all shot."⁴ Jesus certainly doesn't say to murder your enemies. But neither does He say ignore your enemy, as if that were possible anyway. Nor does He say endure your enemy, as if equanimity were sufficient. Jesus says, "*Love your enemy.*"

This gets very practical. Who comes to your mind? Who has been hostile to you? Who wouldn't be sorry if you dropped off the edge of the earth? You didn't have anything against them but they apparently had something against you. And the longer it has gone on, the more they have now become your enemy. Jesus says, "*Love them.*"

What does that look like? It looks like praying for them. Jesus said, "*Love your enemies and pray for them.*" Fredrick Bruner wrote, "There is an alchemy present in prayer that can only be described as miraculous. More than psychological forces are at work in prayer for enemies; slowly but surely real spiritual energies are inserted into the will until—as surprisingly for disciples as for enemies—something like a little actual love for the other person begins to come flowing (or dripping) out."⁵

Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, assassinated by the Nazis wrote, "(Prayer for our enemy) is the supreme demand. Through the medium of prayer we go to our enemy, stand by his side, and plead for him to God... For if we pray for them, we are taking their distress and poverty, their guilt and perdition upon ourselves, and pleading to God for them. We are doing vicariously for them what they cannot do for themselves."⁶

Jesus did this when He prayed sincerely in Luke 23:34, "*Father forgive them for they don't know what they are doing.*" We can do this only by looking not at how the enemy is treating us but how Jesus is treating us. Look at the following two passages:

Romans 5:8 – "*For God showed his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.*"

Colossians 1:21-22 – "*Once you were alienated from God*

***We can do this only by looking not at
how the enemy is treating us but
how Jesus is treating us.***

and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled...through (Jesus') death..."

And so as forgiven and loved enemies of God we forgive and love those who hate us—and we pray for them.

120 years ago AF Vilmar wrote, "We do not reciprocate their hatred and contention, although they would like it better if we did, and so sink to their own level. (So) how is the battle to be fought?... (We will pray) the prayer of earnest love for these...who stand around and gaze at us with eyes aflame with hatred, and who have perhaps

already raised their hands to kill us. It will be a prayer for the peace of these erring, devastated, and bewildered souls, a prayer for the same love and peace which we ourselves enjoy, a prayer which will penetrate to the depths of their souls and (tear) their hearts more grievously than anything they can do to us."⁷

The "perfect" Jesus calls for has to do with a heart that is radically changed.

We not only pray for our enemies but, in verse 47, Jesus clearly implies that we are to "greet" our enemies. He said, *"And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others?"* Now we are not just privately praying for them, but we are face-to-face with them. This greeting is not a perfunctory "hello" but a heartfelt desire for their welfare. This is not cold civility toward our enemies—this is warm consideration for them. This is not just saying the best but also sincerely wishing God's best for them.

There is yet a third description of love for our enemies. The Gospel writer Luke, in a passage parallel to this one, cites Jesus as saying, *"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."* (Luke 6:27-28) Consistent with the intent of Matthew, Luke adds, *"Do good to those who mistreat you."*

Stanton was Abraham Lincoln's secretary of war—probably the most important position in Lincoln's cabinet. But Stanton had always hated Lincoln and was his bitterest opponent making fun even of Lincoln's looks and seeking to embarrass him at every opportunity. Lincoln's other advisors thought he was making a serious mistake in appointing such a bitter enemy to such an important post. When Lincoln died, years later, Stanton called Lincoln one

of the greatest men who ever lived. If Lincoln had returned Stanton's hate both men would have gone to their deaths bitter enemies. Lincoln had often said, "I destroy my enemies when I make them my friends."

Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, "To do him a wrong was to beget a kindness from him. For his heart was so rich...that if you sowed therein seeds of hate, they blossomed love."⁸

Is that us? Read Jesus' words again:

"I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also...Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect."(Matthew 5:39, 44, 48)

Perfect here is not perfect as in coldly without error but perfectly mature, like Jesus, or as Luke more warmly puts it, "merciful" - having the same attitude Jesus had. It ; an attitude and conduct that is very different from what we would normally be and do.

The better I know myself and the longer I observe human nature, I know how humanly impossible this teaching of Jesus is. Martin Luther understood this when he wrote, "This word is too high and too hard that anyone should fulfill it. This is proved not merely by our Lord's word but by our own experience and feeling. Take any upright man or woman. He will get along very nicely with those who do not provoke him, but let someone proffer only the slightest irritation and he will flare up in anger...if not against friends, then against enemies. Flesh and blood cannot rise above it."⁹

What do you think as you hear Jesus' description of a

“kingdom” attitude? Does it come off as naïve, unrealistic, and not to be seriously entertained? It would be hopelessly naïve if anyone other than Jesus had spoken these words. Augustine wrote, “To love those who love you is human; to hate those who love you is demonic; but to love those who hate you is divine.” It takes an act of God to bring this about in us.

We must remember that this kingdom lifestyle grows out of a relationship rather than producing that relationship. “Be perfect” is not a command one is to keep in order to belong to God—but belonging to God, we are to emulate our Father. Jesus is the one with whom we must have a relationship in order to live the “kingdom” life He offers. We simply will not be willing or able to live the “kingdom life” unless we believe that Jesus is God’s (appointed) Savior enabling us to live it. Someone wrote so well, “The height of the Sermon on the Mount is clearly love; its depth is clearly faith.”¹⁰

Jesus is not first of all calling us to do what He does but to be what He is. He calls us to be permeated with love—to act out of hearts of love rather than trying to act in ways contrary to our hearts. We need God to change us from the inside out. I don’t want to think I must do better at loving people and not retaliating when offended. I don’t want a mental list of what I’m going to do in relationship to someone who has offended me or who considers me an enemy. I want to bow before God and acknowledge that I need a heart transplant; I need His kind of love and I need for Him to act because I can’t.

Without His intervention, I will turn these words into law and try to live up to the law. But I will fail in the future as I have in the past. I need Him to infuse my heart with His kind of love—and I must want it. It is precisely that new

“kingdom” power to love that Jesus came announcing and He still offers today.

End Notes

¹ Fredrick Bruner, *The ChristBook*, p. 212

² Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, p. 181

³ Source unknown

⁴ H. Robinson, *The Christian Salt and Light Company*, p. 174

⁵ Fredrick Bruner, *The ChristBook*, p. 220

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 166

⁷ AFC Vilmar, quoted by Bonhoeffer

⁸ H. Robinson, *The Christian Salt and Light Company*, p. 181

⁹ Bainton's *Luther*, p. 46, cited in Bruner, p. 212

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 225

Chapter Nine

Kingdom Motivation Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

I want to start this chapter reviewing the passage we study next.

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

"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.

"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."(Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18)

I begin with a rather embarrassing illustration drawn from

my own life. But it happened long enough ago as to suggest that I have no more recent illustration from my own experience and thus also suggest that I have become much more righteous since then. If that were my motivation, that very motivation would be an example of the hypocrisy Jesus warns us of in this passage. But that gets ahead of ourselves.

When Billy Graham last held an evangelistic crusade in Denver, I was the chairperson of the Pastors' Committee, with 900 churches supporting the crusade. We worked for months before the crusade and when it finally occurred, I was invited to sit on the platform at Mile-High Stadium with Graham and to speak and pray before the assembled thousands. I was so ashamed of my motives and thoughts for desiring that opportunity that I turned it down. I suspected I couldn't stand before that crowd by Billy Graham's side and not just glory in the honor.

But a strange thing occurred. After I turned it down, I found myself glorying in my humility and thinking that surely God, and anyone else I could tell, would be pleased with my self-denial. My act of righteousness, that is my self-denial, became the very trap I fell into. I stepped out of the gross hypocrisy of wanting to be known for my efforts for God into the more subtle hypocrisy of wanting God and others to think more highly of me for my humility.

The subject of this text is not about giving, praying or fasting. They are about what Jesus points out in verse 1: *"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."*

Early in chapter 5 (in the Beatitudes) we learned how God's grace is what brings us into His kingdom. Later in chapter 5

(in the six illustrations) Jesus showed us some of the great possibilities of Kingdom living—a “kingdom” lifestyle. Now early in chapter 6, Jesus shows us how to live that lifestyle in the right way—with God and not others as our audience. He begins with a warning: “*Be careful.*” In other words, look out, beware, or be on guard.

In chapter 5, verse 20, we were told that unless our

Jesus warns us that we aren't done growing as Christians when we finally get to the place where we actually cheerfully give or do any number of other good things.

righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law we certainly will not enter the kingdom of heaven. By this Jesus was not calling us to more or greater acts of goodness than the Pharisees, but to a wholly different kind of goodness. A Christ-follower does not just adhere to the strict letter of the law, but through a change of heart, desires and acts in the spirit of the lawgiver—God. And the latter part of chapter 5 dealt with what Jesus meant by that. For example, Jesus was not calling us merely to refrain from murdering those who offend us, but as His followers, we are to love, pray for and do good to those who harm us.

Now in verse 1 of chapter 6, we find that if we do that, if our righteousness exceeds the Pharisees, we encounter a danger—the danger of hypocrisy. When Jesus speaks of “acts of righteousness” in the opening verse, He is speaking of the good things we do for others—any act of mercy or generosity that we might do for someone. But what is important to note is that it is the very “act of righteousness” that can be the problem. Jesus warns us

that we aren't done growing as Christians when we finally get to the place where we actually cheerfully give, or faithfully pray or do any number of other good things. In fact the very doing of those good things becomes a potential land mine for us.

These verses do not contain a command for Christians to give, pray and fast. Jesus assumes that Kingdom citizens will do "acts of righteousness" - He's already spoken of that. These are people who have experienced God's mercy and want that mercy to flow through them to others. But, says Jesus, don't stumble over your good deeds and "break your spiritual neck"¹

In verse 1 Jesus gives us three illustrations to help us understand. The first thing I notice is how almost exactly parallel the illustrations are.

Giving

He calls some hypocrites—those who announce their giving. They announce it in the synagogues and on the street corners. They announce it to be honored by men. But Jesus says, *"I tell you the truth, they have received their reward. But when you give, do it in secret so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."*

Praying

The second illustration is in verses 5 and 6. *"Hypocrites pray conspicuously standing on street corners and synagogues to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward. When you pray, do it in secret to your Father who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."*

Fasting

The third illustration is in verses 16-18. Hypocrites look like they are fasting, to show men they are fasting.

"I tell you the truth, they have received their reward. When you fast do it in secret. And your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

So what do the illustrations illustrate? They illustrate a contrast. The contrast in:

Who: Hypocrites vs. "You" kingdom citizens

What: Conspicuous vs. inconspicuous goodness

Why: To be known by others vs. known by God

The Result: Reward now vs. God's reward later

In all three illustrations Jesus refers to hypocrites. Originally the word was used of actors with no particularly negative connotation. It was one who pretended or acted like someone he/she was not. But the word began to take on moral connotations. We might think of the person who intentionally deceives others—a fraud, a hypocrite. Or we might more likely think of the person who is so self-righteous that he or she is blind to their own faults even while criticizing others. It is the churchman who publicly castigates adulterers but privately relishes pornography. It is the woman who condemns immorality in her neighbor but delights in reading it in novels.

But I think Jesus has something else in mind here—something much more subtle. And that is why He warns us. Nobody is getting cheated and the recipients of their generosity or service are pleased. In fact the hypocrite may really believe that his primary motive is the good of the other person, or obedience to God in praying or fasting. But in all three illustrations what does Jesus say is really going

on?

Pride in Charity

Look at the first illustration in chapter 6, verses 2-4—financial charity. What we are doing is good. We make our contributions, good contributions, contributions that really help people, contributions that further the kingdom. But Jesus looks at our hearts; He knows our motives. We like the appreciation and respect others give us, or more subtly, we like the feeling we feel, we like the self-congratulations, we admit, we even like the thought that God will certainly be more pleased with us.

We don't blow trumpets today but we do put donors on the "President's Counsel" or publish their names at the "Gold"

The hypocrites Jesus has in mind are doing the right things; they aren't pretending good and doing bad.

level. Some Christian organizations treat donors the way airlines treat frequent business travelers—red carpet treatment, special privileges, honor and status. I was in a church that in years past had published the contributions of its attendees. It was originally intended as a means of accountability but probably became a source of pride or false embarrassment.

When we were asking people at my church to make commitments to the building fund, we were encouraged by stewardship organizations to invite leaders of the church to publicly indicate the exact amount of their intended contribution so as to encourage others to give. We didn't do it, because knowing what another gives tempts both the giver and the recipient to hypocrisy—the donor to giving more generously than he otherwise would and the recipient

to treating the donor differently than he otherwise would. But Jesus' warning is even to us who know we shouldn't seek public approval. He warns even of self-approval. Someone may give a great deal of money anonymously and then think smugly to him or herself how benevolent they are. Someone may give very little but it represents a great sacrifice for them and then they proudly think of themselves as more spiritual than the one who can give much without it hurting at all.

Pride in Prayer

Look at the second illustration about praying in verses 5-6. Who would fault us for praying? Praying is what Jesus asked us to do. But the right thing can be done in the wrong way. In the illustration, they prayed to be noticed by others. They felt good about being competent in public prayer—they were eloquent or at least able. They sought opportunity to demonstrate their piety.

What was supposed to be a conversation with God had become a statement to others. Praying at meals in restaurants can be more to make a statement about our piety than to truly thank God for His provision. A newspaper account noted that the opening prayer in the legislature was the finest prayer ever offered to the legislators. Telling! Or maybe our hypocrisy is not so obvious. You see, we just take secret delight in being known as a man or woman of prayer. Or we fear what others will think of our spirituality if we don't pray adequately.

Pride in Fasting

Look at the third illustration in chapter 6, verses 16-18—Fasting. The hypocrites made themselves unrecognizable in order to be recognized—literally “they disfigure their faces

so that they may figure to people.” Fasting was not unique in that day but these people wanted everyone to know they were doing the religious act of fasting. They were pretty obvious in their desire to be noticed. We might cover our hypocrisy better. But we hope someone will ask why we aren’t eating, so after momentarily demurring we can tell them we are fasting. And when someone does ask we have a sense of satisfaction.

We secretly take pride in our self-denial.

We might think, I hope people notice I am still driving the same old car, live in the same house, and apparently haven’t wasted my money (God’s money) on frivolous toys. Or even if no one notices, and even if we don’t want anyone else to notice, we can still feel smugly superior to others because of our great discipline. And we take comfort in knowing that at least God will notice. Because God and I know I’m a cut above the average.

In all three illustrations we either revel in the approval of others or are privately pleased with ourselves even when others don’t notice. The hypocrisy is in the contrast between the selfless, pious, appearance of our actions and the real motive, which is fundamentally self-centered. Helmut Thielicke tells of a nurse he had known for many years who was outstanding in her competence and attitude toward her patients. Thielicke asked her the source of her selflessness in service. With a radiant smile she told him that every night she was setting another jewel in her heavenly crown and she already had 7,175. She was building up IOUs in heaven that she expected to cash in someday. She was not giving; she was buying!

Thielicke says that when he heard that, he as a patient felt

as if she were no longer the caring servant he had thought her to be but she was only using him to get something else. The sick people she cared for were only means to reach her desired objective. That is hypocrisy. It looked like selfless care but it was actually selfish greed.

Our Call

What does Jesus call us to instead of such hypocrisy? In verses 3,6, and 18 He tells us to do our acts of righteousness "in secret":

"do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray...in secret. Fast (in a way) that will not be obvious to men."

The point cannot be that we should always hide our good deeds, after all Jesus had just said in chapter 5, verse 16 *"let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."*

The point is that we are not to do our good deeds in order to be seen by others or even ourselves and lauded or self-congratulated for our spirituality, our goodness and thus rewarded. Jesus wants us to be unselfconscious about our obedience to Him and our service to others.

This "secrecy" Jesus calls us to is mostly secrecy from ourselves. We can look at the six illustrations Jesus gave us in chapter 5—forgiveness instead of anger, loving instead of lusting, faithfulness instead of divorce, honesty instead of deceit, and doing good to one's enemies instead of retaliation—and by His grace begin to live that way as kingdom citizens. But we can at the same time begin to take pride in our achievements.

When that happens we have taken our eyes off the relationship we have with Jesus and have begun to focus on the kingdom lifestyle. We begin to think of our kingdom lifestyle as extraordinary. But such a lifestyle is not extraordinary, it is simply the ordinary lifestyle of Jesus now being lived out through us, His followers. We are simply following Jesus and spontaneously and without premeditation doing what He does. Jesus wants us to have an unselfconscious relationship of obedience to Him.

We are not to do our good deeds in order to be seen by others or even ourselves and lauded or self-congratulated for our spirituality.

This is an issue of faith because the question is, “Do I trust God to respond to my faithfulness in the best and sufficient ways or do I need the response of others and myself to make up what God can’t or won’t give me? The need to impress or to be noticed is built in. The issue is who are we trying to impress—who are we trying to please? Ourselves, others or mostly God?

Jesus, please rid me of all those subtle hypocrisies. Let me follow You, love like You, live like You and do it not to curry Your favor or anyone else’s but just because I belong to You.

End Notes

¹ Helmut Thielicke, *Life Can Begin Again*, p. 81

Chapter Ten

“A Life That Matters!” Matthew 6:19-24

Several friends of ours live in the Colorado mountains near where fires raged in early spring, 2002. The fires were so close that evacuation was recommended. They were telling me how interesting it was to watch their young children pack to evacuate. When told to get the things that mattered the most, their 6- and 10-year-olds packed a favorite doll, Legos, a trophy, pictures, something their grandmother had made for them and their Bibles. I'm certain we've all done the mental exercise of deciding what we would grab on our way out, if our house were burning.

My brother and sister-in-law have eight children (five are adopted). Several years ago when living in rural northern Minnesota outside any fire protection district, their house burned to the ground. The house contained not only all you would expect: clothing, pictures, and other personal belongings, but it also contained all computers and records for their several small businesses. It all went up in flames. They had nothing but the clothing they were wearing and the car they were in as they watched the fire consume their home and businesses.

My brother and his wife have always had a great perspective on material possessions, able to live contentedly with little or with much, and so it wasn't surprising to hear them say, after the fire, that the only things they really missed were the family pictures. And several times in the coming months I heard them say, as I've heard others in similar circumstances say, "we thank Jesus that we lost nothing truly important."

What's most important to you? Thus far I have shaped the question in the context of things—material things. But if I broaden the context to all of life (relationships, health, goals, etc.) what is most important to you? Put another way: What do you live for? You get up everyday, you spend your time and your energy—for what, to what end? I know that most of life is lived in a very daily, even mundane, fashion but when you step back and look at the big picture, what do you live for?

I think I'm addressing the same issue Jesus did in this section of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said,
"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."(Matthew 6:19-24)

Are you ready for Jesus' words to ask some penetrating questions of you? In essence, Jesus asks us to evaluate our lives. He asks us to take a long serious look at how we live, what we live for, who we live for and answer some very real questions about them. He asks us to measure our checkbook, our calendar, and our desires by His desires for us and see how they match. But there are two things that we must understand before we do this evaluation:

First and maybe foremost is to see Jesus' motivation in

asking hard questions of us. He wants us to live life in the way that matters. A wasted life is a tragedy and Jesus does not want that for us. His motivation in pressing us about what we live for is His love for us. If your child were spending ten hours a day playing video games you'd challenge it. If your friend were spending 14 hours a day in the casinos you'd challenge it. You'd challenge it because you care—Jesus cares.

***Jesus wants us to live life in
the way that matters.***

The second thing I want us to keep in mind as we consider Jesus' challenge is that He is talking to those who are His followers. This message is for Christians. Jesus is not talking to those who don't know Him or care to follow Him. This is addressed to those who are part of the Kingdom of God: those who believe the King has come and has introduced His Kingdom. Who believe that Kingdom is expanding. Who believe that the King, Himself, will return and complete the Kingdom. Who are citizens of that Kingdom, living as subjects of the King and by the King's values and are looking forward to the King's return.

Christianity is not a "ticket" to heaven but a life. Professor Don Carson wrote, "Life in the kingdom is not simply a question of crossing one hurdle or passing one test, followed by relative indifference to kingdom norms. Involved, rather, is that deep repentance which willingly orients all of life around these norms."¹

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus very clearly sets forth what it means to be a "kingdom" person following the King. Are we Christ-followers? Are we "kingdom" people? Then what captures our hearts? Is planning a vacation or getting

a new “something” or “anything” what keeps us going from day to day? Do we find ourselves trying to anesthetize ourselves with sleep, busyness, entertainment, or drugs so we can make it? Do we have goals, daily and long-term, that are worth living for, even worth dying for?

It’s time for a re-calibration of life; time to ask the tough questions that assess the relative value of the things we live for. What are you living for?

I believe that because of His love for us, Jesus makes these three pointed commands and observations:

1. Give your life to what matters now and for eternity. (6:19-21)
2. What matters to you affects everything! (6:22-23)
3. And don’t fool yourself—only one thing can matter most. (6:24)

Give Your Life to What Matters

“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.”(Matthew 6:19-21)

The statement is fairly straightforward: There are two very different kinds of treasure. There are two very different places to store the treasure. And there are two very different results. And the meaning is fairly clear. Jesus doesn’t want us to invest our lives in things that won’t last but He does want us to invest our lives in what will last.

If we had been sitting on the grass that day listening to Jesus when He spoke of treasures that “moths and rust can

destroy and thieves can steal,” we probably would have thought of material things like expensive clothing, sacks of grain, even money—the common things of that day that people used as their savings. The successful young farmer Jesus told about at another time didn’t have mutual funds or certificates of deposit to invest in so he spoke of building more barns to hold his grain.

But when Jesus contrasts “treasures on earth” with “treasures in heaven” it quickly becomes apparent that in Jesus’ mind “treasures” include more than material things because God doesn’t have a literal 401k in heaven. I agree with those who say the issue here is more about “treasuring” than treasures.

What do you treasure? What do you consider to be of greatest worth? What do you spend your time and energy acquiring and protecting? Yes, it may be material possessions but for some of us it may be social status, employment status, prestige, promotion, comfort, good looks, education, health, or independence. And by looking at our checkbooks, our calendars and our hearts it would be discovered what we treasure, what we consider of more importance to us than anything else.

What do you spend your time and energy acquiring and protecting?

For some it’s education—to get a certain degree and to be among the few who have attained such a level. For others it’s position—to become the CEO, the President, the head of the department, or to be recognized as the best. For others it is money—I don’t remember who but I remember the day a man told me of his marketing business and then showed me the picture of a sports car on his refrigerator

and very seriously said that was his goal. Sometimes that is termed differently as “financial independence,” or “early retirement.”

It’s important to notice that Jesus does not set up a contrast between having possessions and not having possessions, between advancement in your career and no advancement, between education and no education, or between attractiveness and being careless with your appearance. This is not an either-or situation. He does not condemn having a desire for earthly things or having a desire for good things to happen to us. In chapter 7:7-11, in the context of daily needs, Jesus even says we ask for good things and God delights in giving them. Jesus was not prohibiting wealth or possessions. Jesus was not saying don’t save for the future. (See Proverbs 6:6; 1 Timothy 5:8) Jesus was not saying we don’t save for our children. (See 2 Corinthians 12:14) Jesus was not saying we couldn’t enjoy the good things that our Creator provides. (See 1 Timothy 4:3,4; 6:17)

Jesus wasn’t denying the value of those things but He was pointing out the relative value of them. Wealth, social status, prestige, comfort, good looks, intelligence, health, and independence are things that won’t last—won’t continue to be valuable forever. The writer of Ecclesiastes looked at many of the good things of life and sought to find meaning in them but to no avail: buildings, reputation, power, sex, philosophies—all are vain (not that they are worthless but they are transient—they don’t hold their value). So “treasuring” things on earth is not a smart idea because those things will disappear. This can be very depressing. Leo Tolstoy, the Russian novelist, fell into a great depression even after he became famous because he understood that everything he valued in life would decay and eventually be gone. In Jesus, Tolstoy found an

alternative that delivered him from despair.²

Jesus does not suggest we have no desires but that we redirect them. He says in Matthew, "*Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.*" (6:20) Jesus only says what not to do in verse 19 so He can show the superior: what to do in verse 20. The Christian is to be ambitious, passionate, enterprising, and zealous—but for the right things—things that last and things that bring us the greatest good. "Jesus' ethic is not so much for a tepid asceticism as it is a vigorous athleticism. Jesus is appealing for the adventure of faith."³

Jesus wasn't denying the value of those good things but He was pointing out the relative value of them.

So what is He telling us to do? What does "Laying up treasure in heaven," mean? Is Jesus just teaching delayed gratification? If we invest heavily in heavenly things, if we give money to the church and if we give time to serving others, is the point that our reward will be greater in heaven? Is Jesus giving us insider information about where best to invest so that our return-on-investment will be better and in the future we will have more? Is our thinking to be, "You may have your Mercedes and mansion here on earth, but I'll invest my treasure in heaven where Jesus said He is going to prepare a place for us and then we'll see who has the fanciest car and house!

In J.D. Salinger's novel, *Franny and Zooey*, the heroine, Franny, a college student, talks about her new-found insight:

"College is just one more dopey inane place in the world dedicated to piling up treasure on earth and everything. I

mean treasure is treasure, for heaven's sake. What's the difference whether the treasure is money, or property, or even culture, or even just plain knowledge?"

Franny's brother Zooey meets her attack on all earthly treasure with a counterattack: he observes that there is little difference between piling up earthly treasures and piling up heavenly, that is spiritual treasures.

"Is there all the difference in the world, for you, in which side somebody lays up his treasure—this side, or the other? The one where thieves can't break in, etcetera? Is that what makes the difference? As a matter of simple logic, there's no difference at all, that I can see, between the man who's greedy for material treasure—or even intellectual treasure—and the man who's greedy for spiritual treasure."

To his surprise, Franny agrees, "That's exactly what's bothering me so. Just because I'm choosy about what I want—in this case, enlightenment, or peace, instead of money or prestige or fame or any of those things—doesn't mean I'm not as egotistical and self-seeking as everybody else. If anything, I'm more so."⁴

Franny is right. Jesus is not just talking about a different kind of self-centeredness; He's talking about "treasuring" something altogether different. Remember though that He isn't saying we are supposed to pretend we are disinterested in the good things of this life that God may provide. There is a difference between self-interest and selfishness. We are made to have self-interest—to want good for ourselves. But we were not made to be self-centered and selfish. Nowhere are we taught to be disinterested in ourselves but we are taught to not be exclusively or primarily interested in ourselves and in fact we are taught to be more interested in others than ourselves—but not disinterested in ourselves.

But also remember there is a difference between self-

interest and “treasuring.” You can have interest in what will bring you comfort and even pleasure in this life but Jesus’ point is that you don’t treasure those things—they are not most important to you. What is to be most important—what are we to treasure? The way to know is to ask, “What does God treasure?” A relationship with Him. Holiness of character. Obedience to God. Helping others follow Jesus. And, compassionate use of material resources to meet the spiritual and physical needs of others.

By looking at your checkbook, your calendar and into your heart, what would someone conclude you live for?

Many people think in this way, “I want good things to happen to me in life. Thus I will work hard to make these things happen.” And in a self-serving way they pursue only this life. But there are some who think in this way, “I want good things to happen to me in life. Thus I will work hard to make these things happen. But I also know I will die someday. Some things can be good for me before I die, but they will do me no good after I die. Therefore I also should invest in things that will last.” That sounds like “covering all your bets,” or “having your cake and eating it too.” But Jesus hears that and asks, “But what do you treasure?” What has your heart? Where are your greatest investments made? By looking at your checkbook, your calendar and into your heart, what would someone conclude you live for?

Look at Philippians 3:4-9:

“If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness,

faultless.

"But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him..."

Formerly Paul treasured status, position and reputation. But now, in comparison to knowing and following Jesus, those things are rubbish. If you wrote the verses using your own life and values, how would you write them?

As to my family history...

As to my ethnic heritage...

As to my religious affiliations...

As to my education...

As to my professional position...

As to my abilities...

As to my energy...

As to my character...

But I now consider them rubbish in comparison to...

What Matters Affects Everything

First Jesus said, *"Give your life to what matters now and for eternity."* (6:19-21) Now He adds, "What matters to you affects everything!"

"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!" (6:22-23)

I think the first time we read this most of us wonder, "What does that mean?" But the mixture of metaphors is not quite as confusing as it at first seems. The two main metaphors are the eyes and the body. In context, the eyes are quite obviously about seeing which is a metaphor for one's

perspective on life. The body is a person's life. If you have good eyes, seeing eyes, you see things as they truly are.

You have a correct understanding and perspective on reality—you treasure the King and the kingdom. If you do treasure the right things, your body, your whole life, will have purpose and value.

If you think the things of this world will give you purpose and value you are destructively deceived.

If you have bad eyes, blindness, you don't see things as they truly are. You have an incorrect perspective on reality—you treasure the passing things of this world. If you treasure the things of the world your whole life will have been lived in vain, given to things that don't matter. And ("If then the light within you is darkness"), you are living for nothing of value and you don't even know it!

Jesus said in Luke 9:24, *"For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it."* And in Matthew 16:26 He says, *"What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?"*

Jesus said to give your life to what matters now and for eternity. (6:19-21) And then He pointed out that what matters to you affects everything! (6:22-23)

Only One Thing Matters Most

Now He warns us: and don't fool yourself, only one thing can matter most: *"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." (6:24) As I mentioned earlier, I want you to realize again that Jesus is not talking to non-Christians. Jesus is talking to people who claim to be His followers. So in these words, Jesus is not talking to some godless person who is only out for himself or herself. Jesus is talking to the Christian who thinks they can have it all.

- This is the person who wants the eternal security of having a ticket to heaven and all the world offers.
- The person who will "treasure" and serve God with a part of Sunday and treasure and serve their other gods the rest of the week.
- The one who will serve God with a portion of her money and her other gods with the rest of it.
- The one who will serve God with his lips but his other gods with his heart.
- The one who serves God in appearance but their other gods in reality.

Some people think, "I want to live in relationship with Jesus. If He wants me to do something I will do it. But at the same time they think, "I want to have many things. I will do what it takes to get them." Jesus says that is impossible. If you want most to have the passing things of the world you can't want most to live in relationship with Jesus. You have a choice to make; what do you want most? We think we can treasure and serve both—Jesus says we can't. Jesus absolutely rejects the idea that we can "treasure" both God and the things of this world. In fact He says, comparatively speaking, we will hate one and love the other. You can have two employers but you can't have two masters. If the word God means anything, you can't have two gods. Only one will be supreme. Who or what is it for you?

“Jesus is not asking disciples to make a decision for fanaticism or for professional or social suicide; he is telling them to be rational. For he does not say that it is unwise or unscriptural to serve two masters; he says, more matter-of-factly, ‘you cannot serve God and (money or any other god).’ Jesus does not want us to waste our lives practicing the impossible. The prudent sensible course for a Christian to follow is simply to make the basic decision that one will no longer allow one’s life to be determined by the perquisites of success, awards, appointments, salaries, things or (money). We are asked by (Jesus) to turn our backs resolutely on the gods of the world...to deny the gods to whom most give unquestioning fealty and to serve only the living God.”⁵

End Notes

¹ D.A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount*, p. 75

² Leo Tolstoy, *Confession*, in Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, p. 204

³ Fredrick Bruner, *The ChristBook*, p. 260

⁴ J.D. Salinger in Anna Wierzbicka, *What did Jesus Mean: Explaining the Sermon on the Mount and the Parables in Simple and Universal Concepts*, p. 159

⁵ Fredrick Bruner, *The Christ Book*, p. 265

Chapter Eleven

“Don’t Worry” Matthew 6:25-34

Some Christians irritate me! I’m talking about those naïve souls who take Jesus’ words and say, “Christians should never worry.” I say there are two kinds of people who don’t worry: infants and fools. And both worry for the same reason—they’re naïve. Sure, little children don’t worry; they’re ignorant—not stupid just ignorant. Sure, some Christians don’t worry; they’re equally ignorant. “She was born with a silver spoon in her mouth and a Barbie-doll appearance, had access to the best schools, got a job through her daddy, and married a doctor—she’s never had to live in the real world.” Sure, there are other Christians who don’t worry; they’ve chosen to be ignorant. They have those positive personalities that frankly are just unrealistically optimistic—Pollyannaish. Or, they stick their heads in the sand and pretend all is well—like the popular song a few years back, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy.” But while ignorant optimism may be the life of the party, it is not very impressive in the real world of making a living and raising a family.

That’s what irritates me—ignorant or Pollyanna-ish Christians who come along and say, “Don’t worry, Jesus said not to worry. The Apostle Paul said don’t be anxious about anything. It’s a sin to worry, so don’t worry.” That’s like telling a dog not to bark or a fish not to swim—good luck! No, I am not opting for Christians to be negative, pessimistic, cynical, or nay Sayers. I’m just saying, “Get real.”

As I see it, everyone is someplace on the continuum of

worry. On one end of the continuum you have the ignorant and at the other end you have the paranoid schizophrenic. In between you have the Pollyanna, then the one living in denial, then the selective worrier ("I don't sweat the little stuff" but given the right situation, they worry too.), then the private, quiet worrier (you don't hear them worry, but if you lived with them you'd see it), then the open verbal worrier (this person is noisy about their worries), then the neurotic worrier (worry has begun to deeply affect how they live) and finally the psychotic (they are paralyzed by their fears).

At both ends of the continuum, people are living out of touch with reality. Most of us probably fall somewhere between the selective worrier and the neurotic worrier. And most of us think if we can keep ourselves somewhere around the selective worrier and quiet worrier stages we're probably okay. Or if we get really good at nitpicking about verbs we piously say, "I'm not worried, I'm just greatly concerned."

What was Jesus teaching? Was He teaching not to worry at all or just to keep your worry within reasonable limits or something else? Unless you believe the Scripture contradicts itself Jesus cannot be prohibiting worry of all kinds. There is apparently a "worry" which is proper. Jesus Himself said in Matthew 26:38-39, *"...my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will'.*" What do you call that—concern, anxiety, worry?

The Apostle Paul commented in 2 Corinthians, *"I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I*

have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?" (11:27-29) "The pressure of my concern" – that's a nice way of saying it. Again of himself Paul wrote, "For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you." (2 Corinthians 2:4)

The issue is who we trust with our worry.

Any serious commitment to Christ will result in an ongoing concern to be faithful to Christ in the way we live our lives. Any real commitment to the Kingdom will result in a continual concern about pursuing personal holiness and helping others. The anxious love of a parent for his child is proper. Even the thoughtful concern about how we will get our work done is appropriate. Jesus Himself said, before building a tower a man should count the cost, take thought about whether he can complete it.

I think Jesus is clearly not prohibiting all worry. Is it a matter then of what we worry about? Is it okay to worry about some things but not other things? Or is Jesus just concerned with the degree of our worry? As long as we are private selective worriers we are okay but not if we are public or neurotic worriers? The issue is not what we worry about or even the degree of our worry. The issue is what we do with our worry, which means who we trust with our worry—where we look for answers to our worries!

For years you've had your heart set on a certain college to launch you into the career of your choice. You've made

application and now you wait, worrying that you might not get in.

You just bought a new house and your oldest child started college and you've been laid off in an occupation and economy that doesn't look promising. You start looking for work, but you are worried about what might happen if you don't find work or work with the right income.

You are the parent of young children and you've just been diagnosed with skin cancer. Worried? Certainly!

You have an abiding desire for your child to know and follow Jesus because you know it makes all the difference in this life and the one to come. You worry that you might not teach them properly or that they might not respond or that other things will lure them away. Let's take those legitimate worries of life through the grid of Jesus' teaching and see what He has to say.

Jesus' words here are so clearly laid out that we can rather easily capture the flow of His teaching. In verses 19-24, which we looked at before, Jesus ended His remarks with the easily overlooked fact that we can't serve both God and money. It is impossible to serve more than one master. You can't divide loyalties, either you are most loyal to God and His Kingdom or you are most loyal to other goals—usually self-centered goals.

"Therefore," Jesus says, as He introduces this next thought, *"if you are going to serve God then I tell you, you don't need to worry about the other things such as the everyday issues of food, drink and clothing."* You don't need to let your concern for the lesser issues of life consume you. Don't wear yourself out fearing what might happen. This is the way He actually says it, *"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?" (Matthew 6:25) That is His introduction. Then He gives an illustration to support why an obsessive concern with the basic issues of life is unfruitful, "*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.*" This is not instruction to stop working or saving for that would contradict the rest of Scripture. His point is not that birds don't work and so we don't have to either. Birds do in fact work and work hard— just watch a sparrow or any bird. Jesus' point is that our heavenly Father cares for even the birds. Don't dismiss these words as cute but naïve lessons from nature; remember Who it is that is speaking. This is a Man whose whole life was hardship and He knew the cross was coming. We'd best not miss His point.

In the rest of verse 26 and in verse 27, He draws two conclusions from His illustration. The first is that you are more valuable to the Father than birds are. "*Are you not much more valuable than they?*" (Matthew 6:26b)

"Said the robin to the sparrow;
I should really like to know,
Why these anxious human beings
Rush about and worry so.
Said the sparrow to the robin,
Friend, I think that it must be,
They have no heavenly Father
such as cares for you and me."

The second conclusion Jesus draws is in Matthew 6:27, "*Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?*" Worrying does no good. The late evangelist Vance Havner

said, "Worry is like a rocking chair; it will give you something to do but it won't get you anywhere." Obsessive worrying can produce many bad things but none good.

Then Jesus gives another illustration to support why an obsessive concern with the basic issues of life is unfruitful: *"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."* (Matthew 6:28-29) The point is not that flowers don't work and so we should not work. The point is that they are gloriously cared for by our Father even though they can't work to care for themselves.

***Obsessive worrying can produce many
bad things but none good.***

Again Jesus draws conclusions from His illustration—actually He restates the same conclusions as before: The first is in Matthew 6:30: *"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?"* As Jesus pointed out with reference to the birds, so here He reminds them they are more valuable to the Father than flowers or grass that is burned for fuel. He loves them! And the second conclusion is found in verse 31: *"So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'"* (Matthew 6:31)

With His illustrations made and His conclusions drawn Jesus now adds to the why—why not worry? This gets to the heart of it. Jesus could give us illustrations of God's provision all day long and we'd dismiss them. I could have scores of people in this place stand and tell us how God provided and we'd say, "That's nice but you don't know my

situation." Illustrations alone won't cut it because for every happy robin we can think of we can also think of those that hit the windshield. We live with very real negative possibilities. Food, clothing, shelter, jobs, health and relationships are all subject to loss. How can we not worry about such things? The answer is found in verse 32: *"For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them."* (Matthew 6:32)

Actually we have here two reasons but they are two sides of the same issue.

What Is Your Worldview?

The issue is your worldview—your basic beliefs about life. Your worldview is the assumptions you make about how the world operates. There are three basic worldviews: an "open universe," a "closed universe" and a "controlled universe." My thanks to Dr. Don Carson of our own seminary, Trinity International University, for the terminology.

The first two of these views, an open universe and a closed universe, are what control the attitudes and actions of who Jesus calls pagans, those who do not know the true God.

Open Universe

An "open universe" worldview was dominant in Jesus' day—not among the Jews but among most people. Whether it was the spirits of the trees and rocks and sun and moon of the Animists or the many gods of the Greeks and Romans, Hindus and Buddhists, people saw all of life as open to constant change depending on the whims of the spirits and the gods. And every person lived with the responsibility to placate the gods in order to live and even then it was chancy because the gods were unknown and capricious. This is why, Jesus said, the pagans run so hard and give

themselves totally to the mundane things of this world. It was a very fearful world in which people lived, never knowing what would happen and having no guaranteed way to control it.

There are some in our day who are returning to an open universe worldview. They think of the forces of good and evil playing out their games on the chessboard of our lives. Of course these are impersonal forces over which we have no control. It's a huge, chancy, whimsical world in which we hope for the best—become one with the universe. But if you think about it very much it is really quite hopeless.

Closed Universe

The second and more prevalent worldview in our day is the “closed universe.” In a closed universe, everything that is can be explained by what is. There is nothing other than matter, energy and space and they have always been and always will be. Everything is explained by the mechanistic principle of cause and effect. We are solely the product of biology, chemistry and time. And there is no ultimate cause behind it all and thus what happens just happens. You can explain the process but you can't explain the reason. There is no reason, and ultimately no meaning in life. We are told that good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people with no rhyme or reason. Life just is.

Some think of the forces of good and evil playing out their games on the chessboard of our lives.

With the hubris of youth we think we can conquer life but soon realize we are helpless in the hands of mechanistic

determinism. Anything is possible—you could find a lottery ticket and win \$10 million or you could have invested your entire retirement in Qwest stock. A light fixture could fall on your head in the next 10 minutes or tomorrow you could learn that you have a disease that is completely incurable. It is this that causes what some call the anxiety of life. We aren't nearly as afraid of death as of life. We feel terribly alone, ultimately alone and on our own we worry so greatly about controlling it all. If we think about it, life becomes pretty hopeless. At best we can influence it for a while but eventually we will be the effect of some unseen cause.

Controlled Universe

But there is a third worldview. It is a "controlled universe." Given that I am writing to believers, this is probably what you believe. A controlled universe is one in which all that we can see or experience with our other senses is part of the universe that operates by discoverable laws of cause and effect. The sun rises because the earth rotates on its axis. Plant photosynthesis is the result of chlorophyll and sunlight. But outside of that universe is God who is not part of the universe but created it and controls it as He chooses. And even the laws of cause and effect are subject to God's intervention.

Outside of that universe is God who is not part of the universe but created it and controls it as He chooses.

In the day-to-day experience of life, the "controlled universe" looks very much like the "closed universe" but in fact the laws that govern the world were established by God and are controlled by Him. And He has the power to intervene at any time He chooses—and He does intervene

as He chooses. But within this “controlled universe” worldview are two very different perspectives.

Spiritual vs. Material

One perspective is of those who have divided life into the temporal and the eternal, or the material and the spiritual, or the here and now and there and then. This is the person among us who believes that Jesus is relevant for forgiveness of sins and getting to heaven when he dies but considers him irrelevant for job searches, recreation, purchases, and more—you know, the real stuff of which life is made. When thinking of natural things, this person assumes natural means to acquire them. Their motto is “Use your head, work hard and take care of yourself.” We assume God will take care of heaven but here we are on our own.

Even if we do look to God to help us in the here and now we have it in our heads just exactly how He is to help us. As one author wrote:

“True we understand that it is God who must help us and that we cannot get along without him (after all we’re not atheists), so we go ahead and ask him (for help) but we decide (what his help should look like). In other words, God is supposed to help us only by opening the door we are looking at and carrying out the program we have planned for ourselves. To leave him to (decide the way) he will help us, seems to us a bit too risky. That God with all his higher thoughts should have any thought about how he will help us, that we should let his help break in unexpectedly and therefore contrary to all our plans and deliberations in the form of surprises this seems to us to be demanding too much of our trust...And because we cling to our own ways and means we...are torn between faith and doubt, anxiety and trust.”¹

"We pray but not with our hands folded. We pray while letting our fingers drum nervously on the table or secretly reaching for the door through which we are stubbornly convinced is the only one God's help can come, the way which our arrogant and untrusting thoughts have devised and deluded us into believing."² Oh, we believe in a controlled universe all right as long as we get to set the agenda. Jesus speaks of our need to trust our heavenly Father because He knows that the reason we are hell-bent on laying up treasures on earth and the reason we are such servants to money is that we don't trust our Father.

***God made this world and your
life and God sustains it.***

John R. Rice said it is interesting that we ask about non-Christians, "Why can't people trust Jesus for salvation?" A much more pertinent question may be "Why cannot we Christians trust Jesus for everything else after he has already given us salvation."³ It's like a man walking down the road with an 80-pound sack of sand on his shoulder. Another man stops to give him a ride and the man accepts but keeps the heavy sack on his shoulder. The other man says, "Put your load down and take a rest." To which the first man says, "No, it's enough that you would carry me without having to carry my sack as well." That's silly, we say. But even as God is carrying us we insist on obsessive worrying about everyday things because we don't trust him.⁴ In one sense some worry is arrogance—assuming we know better than God.

Spiritual and Material

Among those who have a "controlled universe" worldview there is another perspective and it is found in those who believe what Jesus says in the latter part of verse 32, "*... your heavenly Father knows that you need*

them." (Matthew 6:32) Jesus always challenges the "open" or "closed" universe worldviews and says God is involved and God is competent in the natural things of life as well as in the spiritual. Jesus says He wants us to know that our Father is controlling all of life, even the food for the birds and the beauty of the flowers. This does not deny that God still uses means to accomplish His purposes. It is still true that the bird has to fly to the wet ground and listen for the worm and pick it up. It is still true that we must avail ourselves of the means that God gives to us to make a living. But it is even truer that God is behind, beneath, above and in all those means.

Jesus said, Matthew 28:20, *"I am with you always."* The Psalmist said, *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me..."* (Psalm 23:4) My young son has developed a fear of the dark. When he awakens in the night and comes to our room I quietly say to him that we are going back to his room. I walk behind him but I notice that he often puts his hand out just to touch me as we walk in the darkness, just to know I am there. Jesus said in Luke 12:6-7, *"Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."* Is that only hyperbole or is this a God-controlled universe?

What Did Jesus Believe?

When I reach the "point at which I can see that the (living heart of my heavenly Father) beats for this world and for me, then my anxiety would be removed with one blow. (In such a world) nothing could touch me that had not first passed the censorship of that Heart and been declared by that Heart to be wholesome and good for me. Then in

everything that troubles me, in everything I dread, the hidden theme of love is at work, even though I am unable to detect it in the confused beat of this disjointed world. Then for me it would simply be enough that all these things come from the heart of God..."⁵

If we believe in a God-controlled universe what do we do?

***I know my Father's love
superintends all things.***

Jesus responds in Matthew 6:33 by saying, "*Seek first (God's) kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*" That word "seek" means to ask for, look for, desire to possess, strive for, an unceasing quest. This is not just an attitude but a way of life—what we "seek" is what we give ourselves to, what we work hardest for, what we invest ourselves in and is akin to "laying up treasures in heaven" of the previous section in Jesus' sermon. It is identifying what God is doing in this world and being preoccupied with involving ourselves in it. It is to ask the question, "Where can I throw myself into God's causes?"

We live in a food-obsessed (either too little or too much) and superficial (clothing and entertainment) world. Jesus wants to liberate us from those inane obsessions and the worries that accompany them and free us to focus on what truly matters. We too often approach life as if our needs are the products we are on our own to desperately seek when Jesus says our needs are the loving byproducts of another search – "*seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.*" This is not a quid-pro-quo deal with God! I served you, God, and yet my child is sick—you failed, God! The possibilities for bad still exist, pain may come, things could turn out so differently from what we wanted and yet

mysteriously the care, the concern, the anxiety or the worry are taken away. We trust our Father.

That is not just an optimistic attitude; it is faith. That is not just a positive personality; it is trust. . So Jesus concludes: Don't worry. Don't be controlled by the idea that you are on your own. Don't be controlled by the idea that life is a huge game of chance. Don't fear. So what do we do with our worries? Don't run away from them or pretend they don't exist. Don't dwell on them alone; take them immediately to the Father in prayer. Tell God your cares—all of them, no matter how trivial they might seem to others. Look at the evidence of God's provision—look at such everyday things as the birds and the flowers. In prayer we are brought into the presence of the Father, and as one author said it, "we can hear his heart beating for us."⁶

End Notes

¹ Helmut Thielicke, *Life Can Begin Again*, p. 127

² Ibid

³ John R. Rice, *God's Cure for Anxious Care*, p. 9

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Helmut Thielicke, *Life Can Begin Again*, p. 140

⁶ Ibid, p. 143ff

Chapter Twelve

“The Theology of Planks and Specks” Matthew 7:1-5

It was on a Sunday morning. He came up to me after the services and asked, “Pastor, have you ever visited Cherry Hills Community Church?” Without waiting for my answer, he went to say, “We visited there last weekend. What a church, they must really be doing something right.” Now first of all, the timing of his remarks was a little off. Attendance at Southern Gables was noticeably down that morning and I didn’t feel very good about the sermon. But I went along as if I were as enthused, at that moment, about Cherry Hills’ success as he was. Smiling I said, “Yes, isn’t it great what has happened?” But then unable to help myself I added, “The advantage of being in the right place at the right time with enough money certainly makes a difference doesn’t it?”

What was that about? Why did I have to add that? I heard in his remarks that Cherry Hills was doing it right and we had a lot to learn from them and that their Pastor was really competent in comparison to my mediocrity. In my defensiveness I passed judgment on Cherry Hills’ success as merely the result of luck and money. Have you ever done that kind of thing? I have caught myself bringing up some negative situation about someone else’s life largely to elicit from the person I’m talking to some further negative comment about that other person. I think I did it to lend support to my negative judgment of the person. I think I did it to confirm my rightness, and the other’s wrongness. Have you ever done that kind of thing?

I have a neighbor who is loud, vile-tongued, and verbally abusive to his family. My tendency is to stay away, write him off, and expect the worst from him. Every time the sounds of his abusive language waft into my yard it only reconfirms my judgment of him.

Have you ever done that? Look at Matthew 7:1-5: *"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."*

Here, in our continuing study of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives a command: *"Do not judge..."* Then, He gives a reason for the command: *"...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."* And then He gives an illustration by analogy: *"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?"* Lastly, He gives a solution: *"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."*

The Command

"Do not judge..." One of the worst charges that can be made against us in our culture is that we are judgmental. If you believe certain lifestyles or actions are morally wrong

then you are judgmental. If you dare to hint that living together without being married is wrong, you are being judgmental. The only lifestyle that our culture condemns is a judgmental lifestyle. In fact, if you voice an opinion of criticism of any particular lifestyle, even the Biblically illiterate will use Jesus' words against you by saying, "Didn't Jesus say not to judge?" Even among Christians Jesus' words will be used this broadly. You venture an opinion that your friend should probably not be getting divorced and someone will remind you not to judge.

We are told to be discerning but not damning. The judgment we are told to suspend is the judgment of condemnation.

Is that what Jesus means here? Are you supposed to suspend all beliefs about right and wrong? Are you to be blind and deaf to all actions? Are you to be a non-discriminating, non-discerning, accepting everything, non-thinker? No, that cannot be what He means for Jesus Himself in Matthew 7:15 speaks of others as wolves in sheep's clothing. He has clearly identified certain conduct and even labeled it.

In Philippians 3:2 the Apostle Paul says to watch out for those dogs who are false teachers. Paul said of one man in 1 Corinthians 5:3, *"And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present."* When Jesus said we are not to judge, He was not saying we are to suspend all moral judgment about right and wrong. Clearly Christians are to be observant, discerning, discriminating, thoughtful people. Jesus said in Matthew 10:16, *"I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves."*

When Jesus challenged the Pharisees who brought the adulterous woman to Him He was not saying her lifestyle is her business alone and you judgmental people have no right to concern yourselves with that. He was not saying adultery is a relative moral value but He was challenging the way the Pharisees thought. He was challenging the assumptions they were making about themselves especially in comparison to the woman.

Judging is faultfinding—quickly noticing and even looking for the negative. Judging is to put the worst possible motive on others' actions and be ungenerous toward their mistakes.

Tendency to Judge

There is a deeply rooted human tendency to judge others. A carload of black-clothed white teenagers is driving slowly around a black neighborhood or a group of black teenaged boys is loitering in a white neighborhood.

Judgment: They're bad and dangerous.

A swarthy-skinned Middle Eastern-featured man boards the airplane and sits in the very back row of a half-empty plane.

Judgment: He's dangerous.

Your waiter stands before you with earrings in both ears, a limp wrist, pale complexion and a higher than normal pitch to his voice.

Judgment: He is a homosexual and has AIDS.

A woman walks into Sunday School with a neckline that's a little too low and a skirt that's a little too tight.

Judgment: She's loose.

You learn that your daughter is hanging out with the kid down the block whose father is perpetually unemployed and whose mother is absent.

Judgment: He's white trash.

You find out that your new neighbors are active Mormons.

Judgment: They're enemies of the faith.

You're about to go into business with a man when you discover that he had filed bankruptcy several years earlier.

Judgment: He's irresponsible.

You confided a weakness to your best friend who promptly told someone else.

Judgment: She can't be trusted.

Someone in your small Bible study group "goes on" about the great weekend they had gambling in Las Vegas.

Judgment: He's an immature Christian.

The preacher spoke against homosexual practice.

Judgment: He's homophobic.

Someone doesn't say hello to us in the hallway.

Judgment: They're angry with me and so I'm angry with them.

Your child gets hurt playing at the neighbors'.

Judgment: The adults are irresponsible and the neighbor kid is a bully.

A family at church has decided to not have television in their home.

Judgment: They're weird and out of touch with reality.

You spot your Bible study leader hoisting a cold one at a Rockies game.

Judgment: Not fit for leadership in the church.

You learn that your Bible study leader is a teetotaler.

Judgment: He's a judgmental fundamentalist.

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus places great emphasis on relationships. For the glory of the Father and the good of humanity, no one desired the Kingdom of God to expand more than Jesus. And Jesus made it very clear that the Kingdom of God expands not by sword but by relationships—our relationship with God and with others.

Look at the kinds of issues He deals with in the sermon. They are all about relationships: anger, lust, and desire for revenge, forgiveness, reconciliation, truthfulness, and loyalty among other things. Nothing will destroy individuals and the church or impede the advancement of the Kingdom of God faster or more insidiously than broken relationships. Heresy and immorality are deadly enemies of the community of faith but no more deadly than personal judgment of others.

When I judge I put myself above the other person and imagine that I am better than he is

When we judge another person in the way Jesus prohibits, what are we doing? We are drawing a conclusion and drawing a line. We draw a conclusion that they are different and we draw a line that excludes them from us. We see **something** worthy of condemnation and we turn it into **someone** worthy of condemnation and thus worthy of hurt. And we administer the hurt. We set ourselves up as judge and jury. We put ourselves in God's place. Someone wrote, "All human judgment has a touch of egoism. . This is the secret Pharisaism that dwells by nature in the judge. In judging I elevate myself and seek to put the other person down. And therefore the judgment never helps him, but only embitters him. He often feels (from our judging) that he is being subjected not to justice but rather to the egoism and self- (righteousness) of the one who is judging."¹

But what if we don't condemn some things. Won't that lead to a lawless, immoral, world? Don't I have an obligation to call a spade a spade? Fredrick Bruner wrote, "We sometimes think we have the responsibility to disburse

disesteem in the measure we feel people deserve, and we think these disbursements contribute to social equilibrium and justice. (We assume that) with signs of disapproval the wayward are chastened. But this command tells us to beware of our calculus."² Is it at least interesting to you how Jesus treated the common sinner of His day compared to the way He treated the hypocritical religious sinners? When dealing with common sinners, Jesus rarely found it necessary to point out the obvious.

***We are called to live justly but
not to dispense justice***

It was His obvious love for them, in spite of their sin, that made their sin and their need for a Savior all the more obvious to them. I think Dietrich Bonhoeffer nailed it when he wrote, "The disciples of Christ are to love unconditionally. Thus they may effect what their own... conditionally offered love never could achieve, namely the radical condemnation of sin...If I withhold my judgment I am not confirming the other person in his bad ways. Neither I am right nor the other person, but God is always right and shall proclaim both his grace and his righteousness."³ Judgment is reserved for God and those He places in authority in the home, the church and the government—even though such judgment is carried out very carefully! For the rest of us, Jesus commands, "Don't judge!"

We are called to live justly but not to dispense justice. Romans 12:17-19 says, "*Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will*

repay,' says the Lord."

The Reason

Secondly, Jesus gives a reason for the command: *"Don't 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."* Is this just the prudent, practical and worthy advice that we should model a benevolent attitude toward others because that is how we wish to be treated? Is Jesus' advice simply that if we don't gossip or criticize or otherwise judge people negatively then we won't be gossiped about or criticized? No, His rationale is much stronger than that. God's judgment of us is behind Jesus' words. We are not to live in the delusion that God forgives us when we don't forgive others. Jesus says how we treat others is tied to the way God treats us. Look at several passages in Matthew:

*"Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy." (Matthew 5:7)*

*"Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors." (6:12)*

*"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you
unless you forgive your brother from your heart." (18:35
– Emphasis added)*

Our standing before God in the final judgment will be related to our relationship with others. From Scripture I know that truth cannot contradict the fact that God's forgiveness of us is free and unconditional but at the same time I cannot contradict Jesus' words about the connection of the one with the other.

Our response to others indicates the extent to which we are

protective of our own rights and vindictive or are open to and have experienced God's mercy and forgiveness of us. To condemn another means we are acting contrary to forgiveness and mercy and thus we have no claim to forgiveness and mercy at the last judgment.

Our response to others indicates the extent to which we are protective of our own rights and vindictive or are open to and have experienced God's mercy and forgiveness of us

Those who have appropriated God's forgiveness, offer it to others. And those who don't offer it to others apparently haven't appropriated God's forgiveness of themselves.

Here's the way the Apostle Paul said it in Romans 14:10-13, *"You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written:*

*'As surely as I live,' says the Lord,
'every knee will bow before me;
every tongue will confess to God.'*

So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another."

We don't earn God's forgiveness by our forgiveness of others, but our forgiveness of others is an indication of our experience of forgiveness by God. If we find that our tendency is to judge others, condemning in our attitude, we may wish to look first at our own understanding of and acceptance of God's forgiveness of us.

An Analogy

The third thing I see in Jesus' words is an illustration by analogy: *"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?"* If a professional illustrator drew a sketch of this analogy it would look truly comical. Here's the one guy with a plank sticking out of his eye looking through a microscope to find a miniscule speck in another person's eye. You can imagine people laughing at this point in Jesus' sermon. They understand the exaggeration to make His point. How ludicrous for a giant Sequoia to be teaching a dandelion how to be low profile."⁴ How ridiculous for us sinners to be condemning other sinners.

But Jesus doesn't just mean, *"he who is without sin cast the first stone."* He doesn't simply mean that we are all sinners in some degree. He means that self-righteous condemnation (judging) is the very sin that forms the "plank" in our own eye. He is saying we have no right to compare ourselves to another, to see their sins as worse than any we have committed. In fact if there is a "worst" sin, it is the sin of judging. Read Jesus' words in Luke 18:9-14:

"To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get." But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before

God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted'."

Look how Jesus prefaced the story: "*To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else...*" It is that self-righteous condemnation of others that Jesus is talking about in the text here. We have a huge capacity for self-deception. We tend to minimize the contributions of others and maximize our own. We tend to maximize the faults of others and minimize our own. We tend to discredit others because of some deficiency we perceive while we overlook our own deficiencies. A censorious spirit is a cheap way of attaining moral superiority. The perversion of our assessment may not be so much that we have misjudged the other person but that we have so greatly misjudged ourselves. There may in fact be a speck in the other's eye but our problem is that we overlooked the plank in our own. And it is not enough to say, "Oh, I know none of us is perfect but..."

A censorious spirit is a cheap way of attaining moral superiority

I wish to repeat something I wrote earlier: When Jesus challenged the Pharisees who brought the adulterous woman to Him He was not saying her lifestyle was her business alone and you judgmental people have no right to concern yourselves with that. He was not saying adultery is a relative moral value but He was challenging the thinking of the Pharisees. He was challenging the assumptions they were making about themselves especially in comparison to the woman. Jesus used the opportunity first and most to help the Pharisees shine a light on their self-perceptions—they saw themselves as righteous, as better than, as without that sin, and their attitude toward the woman was

not of mercy and love but of judgment.

A proper attitude toward others begins with a proper assessment of ourselves. We are sinners saved by grace. Helmut Thielicke wrote, "The truth is that in discipleship...a Christian grows ever more compassionate, because he learns to know his own heart ever more deeply and because under the power of forgiveness he also grows ever more free and courageous to see himself as he is without any illusions about himself."⁵

Lastly in Jesus' words, He gives an alternative to the judging, condemning attitudes and actions that come so naturally to us: "*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.*"

I personally don't think this is a text for how to administer discipline to another. I don't think this is written to show us how to judge properly or how to hold someone else accountable for his or her actions. I do think that the emphasis in the text is so strongly on the point of not judging that the emphasis here is on "*taking the plank out of your own eye*" and not on "*removing the speck from your brother's eye.*"

What does it mean to "*take the plank out of my own eye*"? Here is where I think Jesus is implying an alternative to the judging, condemning spirit that comes so easily to us. Earlier I wondered, "Is it at least interesting to you how Jesus treated the common sinner of His day?" Whether it was Peter or the woman at the well or Nicodemus or the woman caught in adultery, even if Jesus confronted them, He did it in a way that left them knowing they were loved. Look at John 8:3-11 where it says, "*The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery.*

They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?' They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.' Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' 'No one, sir,' she said. 'Then neither do I condemn you,' Jesus declared. 'Go now and leave your life of sin.'"

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "When we judge people we confront them in a spirit of detachment, observing and reflecting as it were from the outside. But love has neither time nor opportunity for this. If we love, we can never observe the other person with detachment, for he is always and at every moment a living claim to our love and service."⁶

The Apostle Paul said it this way in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7: *"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."*

Do not judge—instead, take the plank out of your own eye.

End Notes

¹ Helmut Thielicke, *Life Can Begin Again*, p. 151

² Fredrick Bruner, *The ChristBook*, p. 273

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 205

⁴ Fredrick Bruner, *The ChristBook*, p. 274

⁵ Helmut Thielicke, *Life Can Begin Again*, p. 157-8

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 204

Chapter Thirteen

"Knock Knock"

Matthew 7:7-11

Presented by Dr. Larry Lindquist

In the church I left in Illinois there was a little boy named Josh who came up to me every Sunday morning with a joke. Most of them were 'knock knock' jokes. All right. Most of them are really lame, but I'm going to give you some of them:

"Knock knock"

"Who's there?"

"Orange."

"Orange who?"

"Orange you glad you came to church today?"

"Knock Knock."

"Who's there?"

"Cows go."

"Cows go who?"

"No, cows go moo."

"Knock Knock."

"Who's there?"

"Owls go."

"Owls go who?"

"Yeah, owls go hoo."

Oh, these are getting worse.

"Knock Knock."

"Who's there?"

"Goliath."

"Goliath who?"

"Go lyeth down you looketh tired."

You know, knock knock is certainly built on the idea of this passage where we're talking about—Asking, Seeking and Knocking, but you know, the response of a knock knock joke is "who's there"? But we are a little bit hesitant about opening the door. Because we aren't sure what's on the other side of the door. In fact we put little peek holes in our doors, because we want to check things out before opening the door.

But it's hard, because we live in a society right now that has built up more and more of a resistance to strangers. Terrorism certainly has brought that ethos to our country, hasn't it? We're a little scared of people we don't know and we don't trust the people who ask or knock or even seek us. So we are a bit resistant to that, And into that growing ethos of isolationism, skepticism, Jesus speaks this passage of scripture.

"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!" (Matthew 7:7-11)

Why did Jesus use the terms, Ask, Seek, and Knock? When I first read this passage, I was reminded that Jesus seldom addressed things that come easily for us. Because of that I would assume that asking, seeking, and knocking, don't come naturally either. And I must ask why. Why is it hard

for me to ask? Why is it hard for you to engage in seeking God, and knocking? Why is that hard for me and for you?

I want to suggest five reasons, five reasons based on who we are as humans. Jesus speaks to our humanness—the core of who we are as human beings in this. And there are five areas that make up who we are as humans:

- Moral
- Intellectual (cognitive)
- Physical
- Emotional/Spiritual
- Social

Moral

The first reason our core humanness causes us to resist what Christ asks us to do is the Moral area. And I believe that this is basically a case of goodness and badness. The right thing and the wrong thing; this is what morality is all about. So I'm thinking that in our prayer life, one of the reasons we resist, is basically we have brought prayer in our life to the point where it's what we're supposed to do—it's the "right thing to do." When you go out to a meal, being the good Christian that you are, you're supposed to thank God for the food. Right? So we bow our head. "Over the teeth, past the gums, Look out stomach, here it comes. Amen."

We do it because we're supposed to. We write these little prayer thingies because of the fact that they're easy to remember. And it gets us kind of off the hook. We're duty driven. Prayer has lost its value to us, because of the fact that it's something we are supposed to do. It's passionless. We don't have any value to it; it's just something we're supposed to do. You're about to tuck your little child in to go to sleep, you make them into a little burrito, and you

say, "It's now time to do our evening prayers," right? Because it's what we're supposed to do. "Now I lay me down to sleep...the sermon's long, the subject deep. If he should quit before I wake, somebody kick me for pity's sake."

***Prayer has lost its value to us,
because it's something we
are supposed to do.***

Canned prayers are not a bad thing. There are books of prayers. But too often they become just cold duty. One of the main reasons that we no longer Pray, or Ask, or Seek, is because prayer has become basically devalued in our lives. We're more concerned with the posture of our prayer than we are the passion of our prayer or the value of our prayer. It's because it's become routine. It's the right thing to do.

The Prayer of Cyrus Brown

"The proper way for a man to pray," said Deacon Leon Keys. "And the only proper attitude is down on one's knees."

"No, I should say, the way to pray," said Rev. Dr. Wise, "Is to stand up straight with outstretched arms and rapt and upturned eyes."

"No, no, no, no," said Elder Sloe. "Such posture is too proud. A man should pray with eyes fast closed and head contritely bowed."

"It seems to me, his hands should be austereclly clasped in front, with both thumbs pointing toward the ground," said Rev. Dr. Blunt.

"Last year I fell in Higgins' well," said Cyrus Brown. "With both my heels a-stickin' up and my head a-pointin' down! And I made a prayer, right then and there, the best prayer

I ever said. The prayenest prayer I ever prayed, a-standin' on my head!"

God is far more concerned with our passion, with our value, in prayer than our posture. If your prayer has become passionless and duty driven—cold and duty driven—then this is one of the areas and one of the reasons you might struggle with going to God. You've devalued it—prayer has lost its value. It's unfortunate that in our times as a church, we schedule prayer meetings and very few show up because prayer has become devalued. We have a handful of people. Now a handful of people is a wonderful tribute to the value of prayer in their lives, but there are so many people to whom it has lost its value. For whatever reason, prayer has lost its value in our lives, and we don't pray from desperate need; at best it's become cold and duty driven.

This Intellectual thing is a result of our arrogance and our pride.

Intellectual

To ask something from someone infers or implies that I don't have the answer myself. That doesn't sit too well. I must tell you, from a personal perspective, this is the one I probably struggle with most. I'm supposed to be smart. I've gone to a lot of school and I've got some letters after my name that tell you I'm supposed to have all the answers. So for me, not having an answer and going to somebody and asking them for theirs, is somehow saying I've failed. For some reason, men tend to struggle with this a bit more than women. We are at times, not so much directionally challenged as we are refusing to ask for directions. We

would rather drive 20 miles out of the way than admit we don't have a clue where we are.

"Look there's a garage—just stop and ask."

"No. *Grrrr*"

"But it's just around the corner."

"*Grrr*"

We have no clue. I don't know why, but women are just more willing to ask. You know what I'm talking about, men. It's just something that's in us. It's in me. Directions on instructions when you buy something new are the same issue. I had a problem at our house in Illinois—dandelions. And so I was going to buy something to get rid of the dandelions. I had heard about this thing called Roundup. Roundup is a poorly named product. Roundup is something we do at rodeos. This product should be called "kills everything green." That would be a good name for this product. But having no clue and really thinking that I should know what to do with this stuff, I sprayed it. My wife was out of town at the time. She came back a few days later and she said, "Larry, the grass seems to be dying, in big loop to loop things. Do you know what's going on?" It was then that I explained it all to her and I went through this panic mode and read the directions, the instructions. Later, she bought a t-shirt for me that says, "Real men don't need instructions."

There's something in me that says, "I don't need to ask anybody." Certainly I don't want to have to go to God. I've got all the answers. I've got it together. I don't need it. So this Intellectual thing is a result of our arrogance and our pride. And we don't need to have anyone give us an answer. In the cartoon series, *Calvin and Hobbs*, Calvin says, "People think it must be fun to be a super genius. But they don't realize how hard it is to put up with the idiots in this world."

To which Hobbs says, "Isn't your pants zipper supposed to be in the front?"

There is a point in all of our lives, where we struggle with really not knowing the answer. We desperately try to be perceived by everyone as having it all together. To ask would be to say, in humility, "I don't know." We don't go to God because we don't want other people to know we don't have it together. John Stob says this: the reason God's giving depends on our asking is neither because He is ignorant until we inform Him, nor because He is reluctant until we persuade Him. The question is not so much is He willing to give or ready to give, but whether we are ready to receive. The Heavenly Father never spoils His children. Instead He waits until we recognize our need and in humility turn to Him. We don't ask because our intellectual pride fights against it.

Physical

We don't Seek because our barns are full. We don't actually need. We live in a created environment where we have just about everything we need. We have slowly, but very surely, nearly eliminated our need for God. Why should we pray for shelter when we have gorgeous homes? Beyond gorgeous homes, we have three and four car garages. Why do we pray for protection when we have alarms and air bags and security systems? Why do we pray for food when we have pantries and refrigerators that bulge? Why do we pray for clothes? Why should we pray for clothes when we have closets that have too many shoes? Do we have a sense of need? We are rich—beyond the belief of many people in this world. Why do we need to go to God? We don't need anything. And if we do need something, it's the result of poor planning. We haven't used the resources that we have properly. We seek to eliminate the need for God in

our environment.

Dr. P. N. Curren related this story, and event in his life:

When he was preaching in the Boston area, he got a call while preaching there saying an emergency had come up and he needed to get to L.A. immediately. So he explained very kindly to his host and they got him to the airport. Circumstances were such that he only had \$90.00. He asked the airline sales representative how far or how close they could get him to L.A. for just \$90.00? They said Kansas City. So he bought the ticket, got on the plane, and started praying. And as he was on the airplane, flying to

***We have slowly, but very surely, nearly
eliminated our need for God.***

Kansas City, he began to look through his scriptures. He pulled out his Bible and started to read and review the promises of the Providence of God promised to us in scripture from Genesis to Revelation, and prayed as he did so. As they touched down in Kansas City, he had no idea what he was going to do. He began walking to the baggage claim. He didn't even have enough money for a coke. He stood and watched for the bags coming by, and as he did so he bowed his head and began to pray again. "I don't know where to go, God; I need you." Just as he did that, he felt a touch on the shoulder. It was an elderly woman who smiled at him and said, "Are you a minister?"

"Yes I am."

"What are you doing here?"

"I really don't know. But I'm traveling for Jesus."

She said, "You know, when I saw you... I was seated just a few seats behind you, and I saw you read your scriptures, and I saw you pray. And when I saw you pray, God showed my heart that you were in need. I don't have much, but here, I'd like to give you this," and she placed in his hand

exactly the amount of money he needed to get to L.A.

Now you can say that's circumstances. But it's only when we get to a point where we have not orchestrated our lives so tightly such as to eliminate God, or our need for God, that God steps in and does miraculous things in our life.

Not only have we become so rich, like David says, "Don't give me too much 'cause I'll forget about you," but the other thing is our schedule. I think a physical aspect of our lives is our schedules. We are so busy. We are SO busy. We have set our schedules that it is literally, in many of our lives, difficult to find even an hour on Sunday morning to go to church. You have things you're supposed to be doing right now. Going to church is important, but our schedules are so tight, it's difficult to find that time for praying. Our schedules are so tight that we have orchestrated our lives in a way that has eliminated the time for God. Physically, we just don't have time for it.

We haven't had an answer to our satisfaction and therefore we really don't trust God

Seiman Wireless Corporation conducted a nationwide survey not too long ago, trying to find out who was the busiest family in the nation. Know who won? Not a big CEO executive of some corporation; not some high profile attorney; not some ER physician; not some celebrity or politician; it was a youth pastor in Didden, Texas. A youth pastor's family was the busiest family in the nation. Now I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing. Pastors struggle with finding time to pray. We're so busy with ministry and the obligations that time alone with God, prayer, is sometimes a difficult thing. The average length

of time spent by pastors in prayer can be measured in minutes a day. But before you get too smug as a layperson, the layperson averages in seconds. We have orchestrated our lives and our schedules in a way that has eliminated the time and the need for God.

Emotional/Spiritual

This one is basically where we struggle with trusting God. We've prayed to God before and nothing's happened; we haven't had an answer to our satisfaction and therefore we really don't trust God or believe He is going to come through. It's difficult for us to understand that if we could see with spiritual eyes what God is doing, if we could see the spiritual warfare in this place and if we had spiritual eyes that could SEE it, we'd be driven to our knees. We often times don't understand the need to Seek God, to Ask God, because we don't have a real clear deep understanding of our spiritual need. If we did, we'd be driven to our knees; we'd be terrified with what's going on spiritually,

I took a group of students to a conference one summer. Among the group of students was a girl who came from a family that didn't know the Lord and she herself had never given her life to Christ. During this conference there was a gathering of students. We sang some wonderful songs and the speaker got up there and just knocked it out of the park and really clearly shared how Christ is the answer to the needs we have, and that we have needs spiritually - a convicting message. And at the end of this message, he asked us to bow our heads. I did like a dutiful little boy; I bowed my head and closed my eyes, (which I would not suggest when you have a group of high school students.) She bolted. When I looked up, I found her chair empty and she was nowhere to be found. I didn't know where she

was. I was panicky at that point, because we were in a strange city with a lost teenage girl. So, we formed a posse to look for this girl. It was getting dark and we were searching all over campus and finally found her up a tree. She was weeping, sitting up in this tree. God had exposed to her a spiritual need. She wasn't even aware of it and she panicked. And that was a wonderful opportunity to share how Christ can meet that need. You see, she didn't Seek, until she understood her deficit.

***We come to a point in our lives
where God is a last resort.***

You know, revival is just this. It is a re-acquaintance with the gravity of our sin. That's what it is. And when we understand that, then we go to our knees and we seek God and His forgiveness: because of that understanding of our sin. Emotional. We never really consider God. Ever go to the hospital? The Doctor says, "All we can do now..." "We've done everything we can." How pathetic is this? We come to a point in our lives where God is a last resort. I have two friends who work with me at Denver Seminary that seek God first. When they are conversing with somebody, as soon as that person surfaces a need, or shares or expresses a need, they go like this: "Hey, let's pray about that right now. Let's just stop right now and pray."

How often do you do that? You're on the telephone and someone on the other side shares a need. Instead of trying to give this profound advice to fix them, you say, "You know what? I understand. Let's just pray about it. Let's just turn to the Lord right now and pray about it." Do we do it? Probably not. Why do we go to Him last?

Social

I have heard from my parents that when I was a young boy I struggled with all of my being to stand on my own two feet. And ever since then I have been seeking desperately to not need anybody's help. It is something within us as human beings not to want to be indebted to anyone. Knocking on the door of anyone, including God, indebts me to them. I don't like that. I want my space. How about when you're sitting on an airplane? How small can they make the seats? You're in the middle one. There's a person almost sitting on you on your right and there's a person almost on you on your left—they can't help it. You can face forward. You take a moment to thank God there's a television where everybody's focused so no one's going to talk to each other. And if they do, I just tell them I'm a Seminary Professor and they immediately don't want to talk with me any longer. I don't like to be indebted to anybody. I don't want to be obligated to anyone. Knocking, even if it's on the door to God, I don't want to go there because that obligates me, somehow, to God. We find ourselves, even in our prayers, making deals with God, and basically that is getting rid of the obligation. "If I do this, then You need to do this, and we're clear, okay God?"

Persistence and Passion

You see, there is a verb that is used in some contexts called the aorist imperative and that form says, "do it once, do it for all times." But there is another form, a present imperative, which in a verb means "keep doing it—do it once and keep doing it." And that's what is used here. In your Asking, in your Seeking, and in your Knocking, continue to do it. Don't stop; continue to do it. Seek God but seek God often. Seeking presupposes that I have a desire to have it. Seek and you will find. It has to be something that comes from your heart. If you don't value

it, if you really don't care, is it any wonder God doesn't answer. It's not important to you. Value it. Seek it.

God's Answers

God's answer is always filtered through His desire for our best. God's answer is always filtered through what He knows is for our good. He does not give us exactly what we pray for, all the time. Thank God for that! Paul pleaded with God over and over, "Take this thorn away from me! Take this thorn away from me!" And God, in His understanding, understood that Paul's "thorn" was a necessary thing. He did not answer that prayer with what Paul wanted. God does not always answer us. We need to ask and go to God with an open hand and not just our agenda. Sometimes when we pray and we demand a particular thing, we are actually asking for what it suggests in verse 9—for a stone when He would give us bread.

I'm not a big country western music fan, but there was a song written by Garth Brooks a few years ago, called *Unanswered Prayer*. I think it fits beautifully here:

*"Just the other night at a hometown football game
My wife and I ran into my old high school flame
And as I introduced them the past came back to me
And I couldn't help but think of the way things used to be*

*She was the one that I'd wanted for all times
And each night I'd spend prayin' that God would make her
mine
And if he'd only grant me this wish I wished back then
I'd never ask for anything again*

CHORUS

Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers

*Remember when you're talkin' to the man upstairs
That just because he doesn't answer doesn't mean he don't
care*

Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers

*She wasn't quite the angel that I remembered in my
dreams*

And I could tell that time had changed me

In her eyes too it seemed

We tried to talk about the old days

There wasn't much we could recall

I guess the Lord knows what he's doin' after all

And as she walked away and I looked at my wife

And then and there I thanked the good Lord

For the gifts in my life."

1 John 5:14 says, *"This is the confidence we have in approaching God that if we ask anything according to His will, He answers."*

John White, author of several books, was at a conference I attended. As he spoke, he said, "There was a time in my relationship with my wife when we desperately wanted a child, specifically a boy. We prayed and prayed and prayed. Repeatedly, I went to the Lord and prayed for this son. I got to the point in my prayers that I said, 'God, you've gotta give me a boy. I want a boy. Even if my boy ends up in jail, I want a son.'" And then he stopped and started to weep. Then he continued, "Ladies and gentlemen, my 22-year-old son sits in jail tonight."

My wife and I have struggled with infertility. Many from our church have talked with us about that. It's been a part of our life story. But God has chosen to not give us children. If there has been a point in my spiritual pilgrimage I've come

close to shaking my fist at God and saying, "Take a hike," that's it," it would be through this time. But I must tell you, I don't know the bigger picture. God doesn't answer my prayer with the specificity of exactly what I want. Maybe He knows that my wife would die in childbirth and He knows what that would do to me. I don't know. Paul asks for his thorn in the flesh to be taken from him. I ask for specific things. You ask for specific things. And God in His wisdom and understanding says, "You know what, Larry? I love you. And because I love you, I'm going to answer and give you this instead."

When we go to God with repetition and with passion in our prayers, we must go to God with an open hand saying, "God, I want Your will; I want what You know is best for me." And embrace that.

Chapter Fourteen

“Hard Choices” Matthew 7:13-27

After affirming that God’s Kingdom is available now and we are to live a Kingdom lifestyle, Jesus comes to His conclusion. It is decision time! Which life do you want? The one the world offers or the one He offers? In His conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus pulls no punches. His words are hard-hitting and unconditional. There’s no halfway, partial commitment, one foot in the world and the other in the kingdom of God. We are either Christ-followers or we are world-followers and the difference is obvious. He clearly lays out the ultimate results of the choice— death or life.

He does this with four word-pictures—two gates, two trees, two doers and two houses. Read the words of Jesus:

“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 thorn bushes, 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!'

"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."

These are very disturbing words because they challenge how some of us may define Christianity, even our own Christianity. In studying this text, it pushed me into the uncomfortable place of evaluating my own Christianity, even to the point of asking myself if I am truly a Christian. I think this text will put you in the same uncomfortable place. I say "uncomfortable" but not discouraging. Because the result Jesus seeks is that we would choose Him—that we would come to Him for mercy and grace.

As I mentioned earlier, the four word pictures Jesus uses to challenge us to decision are two gates, two trees, two doers and two houses. What you will see with each successive picture is that Jesus tightens the focus or narrows the scope of whom He is addressing.

With the two **gates**, He is talking about all humanity—Christians compared to non-Christians.

With the two **trees**, He is talking about Christians—But it is Nominal Christians, meaning Christian in name only,

compared to those who truly are Christians.

With the two **doers**, He is talking about practicing Christians, but with a distinction between those who merely conform to Christian custom and those who are obediently following Jesus.

With the two **houses**, Jesus is giving a conclusion to the conclusion—the difference between genuine and false Christianity is not in the appearance but in the foundation—a relationship with Jesus that results in obedience.

The Two Gates

Let's start with the first word picture.

"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." (Matthew 7:13-14)

The first things you notice are that in this word-picture Jesus describes two gates, two roads, two destinations and two crowds. The gate or road to destruction is wide or broad. "Broad" can mean spacious or roomy. Through this gate and on this road there is plenty of room for different opinions. There is plenty of room for different lifestyles. There is tolerance, permissiveness, and no boundaries in thought or conduct. Through this gate and on this road we need leave nothing behind. We can take our prejudices, our anger, our pride, our self-righteousness, our lust, and any other attitude we choose.

In his autobiography, C. S. Lewis spoke of how at 13 he began to broaden his mind from the restrictions of his childhood religion. He wrote, "I was soon changing 'I believe' to 'I feel.' And oh, the relief...from the (tyrannical)

noon (heat) of (God's) revelation I passed into the cool evening twilight of Higher Thought, where there was nothing to be obeyed, and nothing to be believed except what was either comforting or exciting."¹ That's the religion of many people—a religion of their own making, a god of their own creation, and one that conforms to their assumptions. If there are terrible sins they are what others do. And if there is a god, He exists to support me.

Through this gate and on this road we need leave nothing behind. We can take our prejudices, our anger, our pride, our self-righteousness, our lust, and any other attitude we choose.

Notice that the wide gate/broad road is the choice of the many—it is the religion, the philosophy, the life—of the masses. But also notice it is the road to destruction. Don Carson wrote, "The pages of the Bible strain metaphor and exhaust the resources of language in describing the holy delights of the new heaven and the new earth still to come; but they scarcely do less in outlining the horrors and terrors of hell. The latter is variously described as the place of outer darkness, the place where the worm will not die, the place of exclusion and rejection, the place of burning and torment, the place where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth. I am not trying to give hell's coordinates, nor place it on a map. Just as I find myself unable to describe the new heaven and earth except in the metaphors of Scripture, so I cannot describe hell except in the metaphors of Scripture. But those metaphors are staggering."²

But notice the narrow gate, the narrow road. "Narrow" is from the verb that means experiencing trouble or difficulty. The gate is narrow, constricted, and not easily found. To enter the kingdom of God, to become a Christian, is hard! Wait a minute! I thought becoming a Christian was easy. I thought the whole point of grace was that we don't have to do anything—God has done it all; it is true that God has done it all, it is true that it is all of grace. But it is equally true that it is hard. We want to become Christians on our terms instead of God's terms. You see to go through this gate to the kingdom of God requires that we leave everything else behind. We have to abandon our sin, our selfish ambition, our independence, and our rights. We have to let go of ourselves to take hold of Jesus. And that's hard because nearly everything in us says "hang on to what you can see, trust yourself, get what you can while the getting is good."

To enter the kingdom of God, to become a Christian, is hard! We want to become Christians on our terms instead of God's terms

In Matthew 19 it is recorded that a wealthy man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "... 'go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.' When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth. When the disciples heard this they asked in astonishment, 'Who then can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.'"

To abandon what we naturally cling to in order to lay hold of Jesus is the hardest thing we will ever do but with God all things are possible.

What does it mean then to enter the narrow gate? It is not just agreeing to not do certain things or to do others. The gate, the road, is a person. In Jesus' word-picture, He is the narrow gate.

"Therefore Jesus said again, 'I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep'." (John 10:7)

"Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'." (John 14:6)

To enter the gate is to trust Jesus. To enter the gate is to take hold of Him. To enter the gate is to follow Him.

We don't just decide to be more conservative in our lifestyle (to drink less, or go to church more often) and call that the gate or the road of Christianity. The narrow gate or road is much more dynamic than that—it is following Jesus—it is day by day, fluid, flexible, ever-changing, and dynamic. It is not a list of dos and don'ts; it is relationship and active daily following. He is the gate, He is the road and He is the life. To enter means to live in a follower relationship with Jesus. The kingdom is about the King not just about doing a list of things. This is a call to accept the King, to receive Him as saving-Lord, and to resolve to follow Him. And Jesus calls us to that, *"Enter through the narrow gate."*

Two Trees

The second word-picture of the two trees is not about the difference between the many and the few but the difference between some of the few and others of the few. It is the difference between Christian in name only and truly Christian. Matthew 7:15-20 says, *"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 thorn bushes, 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."*

Jesus marks the difference between the apparently Christian and the true Christian. He or she even does outstanding ministry in Jesus' name but they aren't in the kingdom

The specific illustration Jesus gives is about those who claim to be Christian teachers. But I am convinced that in context this applies not only to those who claim to be teachers but to all who claim to be Christian but aren't. And the point of the passage is that you can eventually tell the difference between false Christians and true Christ-followers. And the difference will be seen in what they produce. A thorn bush bears thorns and a fig tree bears figs. A genuine Christian bears good fruit – *"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."* A fake Christian bears bad fruit – *"immorality, impurity...hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy..."*

and the like. This is hard because when we look at ourselves we see a mixture of the good and the bad.

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 13:5, *"Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves."* If, even after years of claiming to be a Christian, bad fruit characterizes our lives, we have reason to wonder. If we do not see the fruit of the Spirit, the likeness of Jesus, beginning to appear, there is reason to wonder about the genuineness of our faith. Please don't be unbiblically hard on yourself. The issue is not perfection but direction. It is not that you must be instantly perfect in Christ-likeness but it is that the direction of your life is Christ-likeness.

Jesus says that to be a follower of His makes a difference in our lives. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus laid out a kingdom ethic; He described the changed heart of one who has entered the kingdom—to be related to Jesus changes us. Nominal Christianity is no Christianity at all. If you are Christian in name only, enter the narrow gate today.

Two Doers

In the third word-picture, Jesus narrows the focus even more. In the word-picture of the two gates Jesus contrasted Christians with non-Christians. In the word-picture of the two trees Jesus contrasted true Christians with false Christians—Christians in name only. Now in this word-picture of the two doers, . One of the people described here looks like the real thing but isn't. . This is the most disturbing part of Jesus' conclusion. Read His words again: *"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!’” (Matthew 7:21-23)

This is disturbingly close to home. They (we?) profess Christ (“Lord, Lord”) and they (we?) display spiritual gifts (prophecy, exorcism and miracles) but they (we?) don’t do the will of God. We have the right doctrine, we even enthusiastically engage in ministry but our private lives don’t reflect a relationship with Jesus. Jesus said in Luke 6:46, *“Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?”* John Stott wrote, “We who claim to be Christians in our day have made a profession of faith in Jesus privately in conversion and publicly in baptism and/or confirmation. We appear to honor Jesus by referring to him as ‘the Lord’ or ‘our Lord.’ We recite the Apostles’ Creed in church, and sing hymns expressive of our devotion to Christ. We even exercise a variety of ministries in his name. But he is not impressed by our pious and orthodox words. He still asks for evidence of our sincerity in good works of obedience.”³

We have the right doctrine, we even enthusiastically engage in ministry but our private lives don’t reflect a relationship with Jesus

Another man said, “It is easy to look like an evangelical Christian without being one.”

First learn the language: “born-again.” “Jesus” instead of just God or the “man upstairs.” “saved,” etc. Second, learn certain customs: modesty in dress; disdain for bad habits such as smoking, drinking to excess, foul language, etc.; regular church attendance, especially Sunday School or Bible Study; pray at meal time, make respectable financial

contributions to the church; and a few other things and you can pass for a good Christian quite easily. Third, have the right heritage: come from a Christian family, have a clergyman or missionary relative, or come from a conservative evangelical church and it will be assumed you are a believer.⁴

When we stand before God in the end we will not be asked if we prayed a prayer asking Jesus into our hearts or if we were baptized or confirmed, or even if we did outstanding things for God. The test will be whether Jesus knows us. We might stand before God with those who sang on worship teams, taught Sunday School, gave great amounts of money to the church and even led others to Christ and hear Jesus say, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" The test is not how well I've done but whether I am truly related to Jesus. Have I entered the narrow gate? Do I cling to Jesus alone? Am I following Him as evidenced by my obedience to Him in the simple everyday relationships of life?

God has not called us to spectacular signs and wonders or to great accomplishments, but to the simplicity of moral obedience. This is not law keeping and it is not cold duty; it is active, willing responsiveness to Jesus. It is not a prescribed path to walk but a person to follow. Fredrick Bruner wrote, "It is possible to work for Jesus and yet not work under him. We can be intoxicated by the power of Christ's person and yet be indifferent or even hostile to keeping his hard commands where they pinch us. It is possible to be powerful for Jesus and yet not allow Jesus to be powerful in us.... It is strangely possible to serve and even to glorify Christ and yet in actual life not to obey him. The fact that 'many' will present their (Christ-naming spiritual-success) credentials at the judgment and that even then they will not be admitted should be genuinely

frightening to all of us.... Where a (Christ-naming spiritually successful person) wins others to Christ, but cherishes hatred for one's rivals or unrepented lust for other women or men, that (Christ-naming and spiritual success) count for nothing at all. In each case Jesus wants reality...He wants to be Lord of both their message and their morality."⁵

Two Houses

In the last word-picture, Jesus describes two houses that look no different from the outside. The only difference is in their foundations.

"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." (Matthew 7:24-27)

One is built on a relationship with Jesus—the rock. And that relationship results not only in hearing but also putting into practice the words of Jesus.

Is your Christianity more of convenience than conviction? Do you call yourself a Christian but you are not a Christ-follower? Have you wanted the gift of heaven without the Giver? Is Christianity for you more a doctrine to be held than a relationship to be lived? What do you do? Plead for God's mercy to break through your cold, self-centered heart! No amount of resolve to work harder will make the difference. We need God's gracious intervention to melt our indifference, break up the ground of resistance, and give us

a desire for Jesus. I'm not asking you to do anything but beg for God's mercy.

You can't fix it, God must! That is something of what it means to be "poor in spirit" – helpless and even hopeless apart from God's intervention.

Jesus is asking us to look within. Do our lives reflect the ethics of the King? Remember from earlier in the Sermon on the Mount? To follow Jesus means:

- Not a spirit of anger and retaliation but forgiveness and reconciliation.
- Not lustful attitudes and actions but faithfulness to one's spouse.
- Not a duplicity and evasiveness but a forthrightness and simplicity where what you say is what you mean.
- Not revenge but true mercy toward those who offend or even harm us.
- Not self-serving in our giving, praying and fasting but genuine.
- Not seeking our own kingdom but God's kingdom.
- Concern for God's name, His kingdom and His will more than our own.
- Trusting God in this life for this life rather than trusting mainly in ourselves.
- Accepting, forgiving, and engaging instead of judging and rejecting.
- Living in an "asking and receiving" relationship with our Father in heaven.

Jesus said that is what Kingdom living looks like—that is what following Him is about!

End Notes

¹ C.S.Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, p. 63

² D.A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount*, p. 134

³ John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount: Christian Counter-Culture*, p. 208

⁴ Kent Hughes, *Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom*, p. 253

⁵ Fredrick Bruner, *The Christ Book*, p. 287

