



A Study of the Sermon on the Mount

Inside-out Righteousness
How We Treat Others

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Lesson 1 – Setting the Stage (Matthew 4:12 - 5:2)

We Are Disciples

Our focus in these lessons is discipleship. We are all disciples of someone. We naturally learn from others how to live. This learning never really stops. You are a disciple of those people whom you seek to be like. Therefore, if we want to be like Jesus, we must be his disciples. Simply believing in him is not enough.

If we wish to be changed, if we desire to be like Jesus, if we say we are his followers, then we must be all in on our apprenticeship to him. An apprentice is a student and a co-laborer. A carpenter's apprentice learns from the carpenter how to do what the carpenter does and how he does it. The apprentice works alongside as he learns. Likewise, we come alongside Jesus as our master and teacher to learn from him and to do the things he does the way he does them.

It should be obvious, then, that we must spend time with Jesus for this apprenticeship to be effective. In Jesus' day, a disciple of a rabbi would literally leave home and live with his rabbi for years. You must be with Jesus in order to learn to live your life the way Jesus would live it if he were you. After all, ...

Galatians 2:20

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

The Sermon on the Mount (SM) is a logical place to go when seeking to begin or deepen your discipleship. The SM is Jesus' declaration of the essence of life in the kingdom that he announced.

Matthew 4:17

¹⁷ ... "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

The principal feature of a kingdom is the fact of a King. Jesus' hearers would have known the numerous indications in the Old Testament of a coming Davidic king. The kingdom of God cannot be understood apart from this expectation. Further, a kingdom is the time of a given king's reign. In Jesus, the forever-king is presented and established. In time, his enemies will be a footstool for his feet, and he will reign over everything. There is an already-but-not-yet dynamic afoot. "The kingdom of God is at hand" sits alongside Jesus' directive to pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done." Essentially, the Kingdom of God is the presence of the King reigning over His people.

The basic message in 4:17 could be translated, "Turn from your former manner of life and follow your king in the light of the fact that the kingdom of God is now open to all." The SM is the most complete discourse from Jesus on how to actually live in this reality.

So, the SM delineates, or lays out, the foundation of our discipleship to Jesus. The emphasis is on inside-out transformation. Jesus will continually go to our inner motivation, not external performance or behavior. This points to obedience that is not so much what we do as what we are.

Introduction to SM

Before getting directly into the SM in lesson 2, we need to set the stage by studying the sermon's context.

Rabbi Jesus

First, who was speaking? Who was Jesus? I say "was" vs. "is" to make a point. Who was he to those who knew him at the beginning of his ministry? Simply put, he was a Jewish rabbi, a teacher, who eventually was considered by some to be a prophet. The cross and empty tomb were a long way off. There was no understanding or expectation of any such thing at this point. While John the Baptist had announced his coming, his identity as Son of Man and Son of God was not fully, if at all, understood at this point. These truths revealed later do not change the lasting meaning of the SM but add color. What comes later is the discovery of how living this out is even possible.

By Matthew 4, the Gospel writer has established Jesus' authority to the reader and now describes the launching of Jesus' public ministry. The trigger was the arrest of John the Baptist who some believe was Jesus' rabbi (a topic for another day).

Jesus' Core Message

¹² Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. ¹³ And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴ so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

¹⁵ "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,
the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles —
¹⁶ the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light,
and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death,
on them a light has dawned."

The quotation in verses 15-16 is from Isaiah 9. When the OT is quoted in the NT, it is intended to point to a fuller meaning found in the context of the quote itself. The Jewish system at the time was such that boys were immersed in the Jewish Scriptures from age 5-13 (or so) with the goal of full memorization of what is now the OT starting with the Torah. Those especially gifted went further while most returned to their father's trade. So, it was expected that when a passage was quoted such as Isaiah 9 above, the full context and meaning would be immediately accessible to the hearers without a longer or fuller quotation.

Isaiah 9:1-7 spoke to the original readers as a declaration of an opportunity to renew their allegiance to God and desire to follow Him in the way He intended or to come again under the effective range of his will. This spoke to reestablishing the kingdom of God among them. Thus, ...

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Jesus’ Disciples

Jesus then calls his first disciples to follow him as their rabbi.

¹⁸ While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

It is clear that they knew who Jesus was. First, he was already famous (v24). Second, this occurred after John was arrested. Disciples of Jesus went with Jesus to the Wedding at Cana (John 2) which occurred before John was arrested. Therefore, they had spent time with him in social contexts and had very likely sat under his teaching in the synagogue. Now, they were being given an opportunity to continue their religious education under a rabbi. This was a special opportunity, and they took advantage of it.

When and Where

The SM was near the beginning of Jesus’ ministry but was not the first public event. As just mentioned, his fame had already spread.

²³ And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. ²⁴ So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them. ²⁵ And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

A word about geography: We typically pay little attention to such things, but when location is specified, it is important to context. It is included in the text for a reason.

Jesus settled in Capernaum on the northernmost edge of the Sea of Galilee. This region was where the Pharisees and Zealots primarily settled. The Sadducees were the ruling priestly class in Jerusalem and were thoroughly corrupt. The Pharisees and Zealots were reform movements with differing goals and moved to relative isolation to carry out their alternative devotions. Galilee was also in the shadow of Gentile influence with King Herod’s palace only a few miles away. Thus, the reference to a people living in darkness seeing a great light from Isaiah 9 and v15-16 above.

Who Was There?

The answers lie in the additional geography listed in v25.

- Galilee – Capernaum, Bethsaida, and Chorazin formed a religious triangle of devout followers. Ritual cleansing was paramount, and association with people outside of this group posed a problem.
- Decapolis – This was a 10-city region on the other side of the Sea of Galilee and was gentile territory, or pagan land.
- Jerusalem – This was the location of the temple and the corrupt Sadducees.
- Judea – This is where the upper crust religious class was located, to the South in contrast to the relative rednecks in the north (everything Jesus is upside down!).
- Beyond the Jordan – This referred to yet more gentile regions. Yuck!

The crowds were made up of Jews from each of these regions, a rather compromised bunch by the standards of many in the crowd. Basically, these groups held disdain and prejudice against one another. Their presence of so many that were unworthy and unclean made the disciples, who were from the religious zone, uncomfortable, to say the least.

The Sermon Begins

¹ Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying ...

The sermon was given on a mountain or a hill. Israel is not Switzerland.

He was speaking specifically to his disciples but with an eye on, and within the hearing of, the crowds. What he spoke was in response to seeing the diverse gathering of peoples considered unclean and unworthy of the kingdom.

There is a powerful parallel here with Moses at Mt. Sinai. As God thru Moses called His people out of Egypt and gave them the Torah headed by the Ten Commandments, so God in Jesus now calls out a new people of God from their equivalent of slavery and gives them a new teaching on how to live as the people of His kingdom headed by the Beatitudes. The gospels in their early chapters are a reenactment of the Exodus.

One final word about the sermon itself. This may have been spoken exactly as written. However, it is more likely that Matthew and the Holy Spirit gathered a series of often-repeated smaller teachings into the SM in Matthew to present the essence of Jesus' teachings at the outset of the telling of Jesus' ministry. This helps explain the differences in the shorter length and variations of the "Sermon on the Plain" in Luke 6 Where Jesus "came down with them and stood on a level place" (verse 17).

Given that this was likely a series of teachings formed later with a purpose, we will need to pay special attention to the sequence of teachings while never separating them from the whole. It will be critical to our understanding.

Questions

What is discipleship? Whose disciple have you been? How do you want your discipleship to change?

What does the phrase "kingdom of God" mean to you? How fully are you under "the effective range of God's will?"

What do you think was going through the minds of the disciples during this early season of Jesus' ministry? Let your imagination run a bit.

Who do you think of as unclean? Be honest. Who would you rather not associate with? Think broadly, culturally, theologically, politically. Then keep these firmly in mind for next week. It may get uncomfortable.

Lesson 2 – The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12)

Jesus uses the context of the crowd just ministered to as the backdrop for his opening statements. This crowd included Jews from many gentile-dominated regions of poor repute in the opinion of those in the religious triangle where the Pharisees and Zealots operated and where Jesus conducted most of his ministry. Those gathered included many outsiders, those who were unclean and unworthy of the kingdom of God in the opinion of those who considered themselves devout. This included his disciples who were raised within the religious triangle and who Jesus was now addressing directly.

It is with an eye on these people that Jesus speaks the Beatitudes to his disciples. These give an introduction and summary of all of his teaching.

³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

⁵ “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

⁶ “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

⁷ “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

⁸ “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

⁹ “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

¹⁰ “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

These phrases are spoken with a cultural understanding so foreign to us as to make them very difficult to decipher who Jesus is speaking about. But first, some general thoughts.

What The Beatitudes Are Not

These are not entrance requirements for the kingdom of God. With our emphasis on grace and rejection of salvation by works, this likely does not characterize our thinking.

Hitting closer to home, however, these are not instructions to do anything. They are not an attempt to list traits that are pleasing to God. Whether they are or are not is beside the point. They are not teachings on how to be blessed.

When I have thought of these, which was not often, I assumed these were character traits that I was supposed to demonstrate as a Christian. This is what God expects from me, or at least what he wants from me. Then, if and when I did them, God would bless me. If you want God's favor and blessing, whatever you think that is, you must be like this. Then God will reward you.

This type of thinking shows just how close we are to becoming a new breed of Pharisees. Our deep-rooted legalistic tendencies are drawn out by the SM perhaps more than any other Scripture. Surely, here is the list of dos and don'ts we've been

looking for. This view of expectations and blessing puts us back in control. We twist this into our own set of rules from which we can control our own salvation and judge others accordingly.

“They would impose a new brand of Phariseeism, a new way of closing the door, as well as some very gratifying new possibilities for the human engineering of righteousness.” (Willard)

What The Beatitudes Are

Simply put, the Beatitudes represent the openness of the kingdom of God. They were an indictment of the religious establishment’s way of satisfying God.

“They are explanations and illustrations, drawn from the immediate setting, of the present availability of the kingdom through personal relationship to Jesus. They single out cases that provide proof that, in him, the rule of God from the heavens truly is available in life circumstances that are beyond all human hope.” (Willard)

The crowds in view are people of all varieties of background, attitudes, religious observance, etc., and they had all just received teaching and healing and blessing from the heavens through Jesus. Jesus now points to them and declares that the kingdom is available to all of them as just demonstrated. They had just been touched with Jesus’ heart and voice and hands.

Matthew 4:23

[And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.](#)

The central theme of the Beatitudes, the SM, and Jesus’ whole life is the free availability of God’s rule and righteousness to all of humanity through reliance upon Jesus himself.

They take those who, from the human point of view, are regarded as most hopeless, most beyond all possibility of God’s blessing or even interest and exhibits them as enjoying God’s touch and abundant provision. This present demonstration of care and provision served to prove that no human condition excludes blessedness.

The religious system of his day left the multitudes out, but Jesus invited them all into his kingdom. God’s blessing and favor is for the undeserving and not for those who think they deserve it. “God helps those who help themselves” plays well in our individualistic society, but it is foolishness and arrogance wrapped up together in a cliché! Anyone can come. They still can. That is the gospel of the Beatitudes.

The description above follows Dallas Willard’s interpretation of the Beatitudes, but there are others. The Beatitudes are very difficult to explain and classify, at least to our modern, western minds. I am confident in what I have said they are not, but not so confident in what they are.

Another compelling view is from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He considers the Beatitudes as statements of blessing upon those who have taken up discipleship, who have responded to the availability of God’s kingdom. “The fellowship of the Beatitudes is the fellowship of the Crucified.” Discipleship is represented as “poor in spirit”, “mourning”, etc. The Beatitudes are statements of both privation and renunciation. This is based on

coupling the Matthew and Luke renditions of the Beatitudes. Luke has four, each starting with “blessed are you when you ...” while the eight in Matthew are more general. It is the “you” in Luke, and Jesus clearly speaking to his disciples, that points Bonhoeffer to consider the Beatitudes as descriptions of attributes of a disciple, though not a condition of discipleship, much less salvation.

This is clearly distinct from Willard’s interpretation that the Beatitudes are descriptions of those considered outcast by the religious elite and to whom the kingdom of God is available. I believe both are in view. I believe Willard takes in the broader context better and continue to trace his ideas below. However, it takes a bit of mind-bending to get some of them to fit. On the other hand, Bonhoeffer’s view leads all too quickly back to what the Beatitudes are not – strict requirements expected of a what disciple must be.

There is tension here which we have no choice but to embrace and benefit from. Holding each of these views in balance, I believe, will be a safeguard against our natural legalistic tendencies. And, they are not so far apart for later in Bonhoeffer’s treatise he states, “These promises reversed all popular notions of right and wrong, and pronounced a blessing on all that was accounted worthless.”

Blessed

God’s blessing in the Beatitudes is God taking the first step and us responding, not us behaving and God responding with blessing.

“Blessed’ is a loaded word. We pray for God’s blessing all the time on all kinds of things. What do we mean? What should we mean?

“The Greek word translated ‘blessed’ (*makarios*) is the highest state of well-being for humans, a blissful existence characteristic of the gods.

“It is a state of existence in relationship to God in which a person is ‘blessed’ from God’s perspective even when he or she doesn’t feel happy or isn’t presently experiencing good fortune. This does not mean a [conditional] conferral of blessing (i.e., I will bless you when ...) or an exhortation to live a life worthy of blessing; rather, it is an acknowledgment that the ones indicated are blessed.” (Wilkins)

Breaking Them Down

Following Willard’s interpretation, the key to understanding each Beatitude is to think why people with the given character trait are looked down upon and rejected by the religious establishment who considered themselves to be the only ones worthy of the kingdom of God.

Wilkins puts it succinctly: “God’s blessing rests on the unlikely ones.”

The poor in spirit are the spiritually bankrupt. From all appearances, they do not have their religious act together. The kingdom of heaven is theirs for the entering.

Those who mourn are those who have suffered some type of personal loss including financial. They are lacking rather than self-satisfied and accomplished. They are not the “beautiful people.” These will be comforted. Their hope and joy will be restored.

The meek are the shy, gentle, or unassertive. They are not the visibly powerful or important. God will provide for them from the whole earth as they need it. This is not the meekness of controlled strength of Jesus. That does not fit the context here.

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are those who burn for things to be made right whether internal or external to them. They want to be clean. They have been wronged and want justice. God can transform their need to fulfillment.

The merciful are those who offer forgiveness and kindness to the guilty and hurting. The leadership was merciless because of their demand for rigorous observance of the law. They yearned for purity but went about it the wrong way. The merciful will receive mercy, in part because they know they need it.

The pure in heart are those who may be compromised or unclean by the religious standards of the day emphasizing external righteousness. It is these who are visibly unclean but clean on the inside who shall see God.

The peacemakers are those who bring harmony among all people. The Zealots sought to restore God's kingdom through violence. The Pharisees sought the same through unyielding, and therefore divisive, standards. But harmony through peacemaking brings a family resemblance as sons of God to hard situations.

Those persecuted because of righteousness have taken an unpopular stand. They did not go with the flow of those in charge. Their refusal to comply gets them rejected or even killed. Yet to them, like the spiritually bankrupt, belongs the kingdom of heaven.

Remember that the context of each is a reference to character traits of those commonly assumed to be outside of God's favor. Keeping this in mind helps filter out misleading interpretations of which I have found several, each leaning back towards standards that God expects us to follow versus examples of those to whom the kingdom and blessing of God is surprisingly available.

This Will Be Hard

Now we come to an odd thing. The last beatitude seems to be repeated in verse 11 but note the pronoun. This statement applies directly to the hearers, his disciples, versus the crowds, or 'those'.

¹¹ "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

We respond appropriately to the Beatitudes by living as if the kingdom truly is available to everyone including ourselves. Thus, we open our arms to everyone. Simply put, such living will be hard. It will be met with resistance outside and even inside the church. Such living will not be warmly received by the establishment, whatever that is.

Willard, speaking to the context Jesus was ministering in, said, "The Law and the Prophets had been twisted around to authorize an oppressive, though religious, social order that put glittering humans—the rich, the educated, the "well-born," the popular, the powerful, and so on—in possession of God. Jesus' proclamation clearly dumped them

out of their privileged position and raised ordinary people with no human qualifications into the divine fellowship by faith in Jesus.”

We cannot expect those “dumped out” to take it laying down.

Questions

How have you understood the Beatitudes in the past? How has today’s lesson impacted that understanding?

What, in your view, constitutes God’s blessing?

Have you ever been guilty of thinking a certain type of person could never enter the kingdom of God?

How has today’s lesson impacted that thinking?

Lesson 3 – Salt / Light / Law (Matthew 5:13-20)

Salt and Light

Jesus has just introduced the SM with a declaration of the availability of the kingdom of God to the least likely in the eyes of the believers, that is the devout, religious Jews. All are welcome. All cultural and social distinctions are obliterated. Further, it is these unlikely ones, these “little” people, without any of the character or qualifications deemed necessary for acceptance, who can actually make the world work. Jesus is putting the world back together, and he will use these to do it.

Jesus then tells his disciples that living as though this was true would mean resistance and persecution. He then follows with metaphors declaring how such living will impact this world with the kingdom life they possess.

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.”

(Strictly speaking, salt cannot lose its flavor. Likewise, once you are a Spirit-filled disciple, you cannot lose that. Therefore, Jesus is likely talking about imposter disciples when referring to salt that has lost its flavor.)

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

Those in the kingdom, whoever and however lowly they / we are, are the preserving and life-flavoring salt. They are the light that dispels human darkness. They are the city, the place of shelter and refuge, visible from far off as a city on a hill. And, it is by us living life the kingdom way, doing what Jesus said by the life and power of God within us, that good flavor is restored to life, light penetrates the darkness, people see the place of refuge they desperately need, and God is glorified.

Law and Righteousness

The next four verses serve as the key to understanding and interpreting the entire SM. They have to do with the law, Jesus’ fulfillment of it, and the core imperative for us.

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. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes 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 does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Yikes! This sure sounds like salvation by works. Hasn't the law been superseded and done away with? You know, salvation by grace and all that? Yet not one iota or dot will pass away from the law until all of it is accomplished. He talks about those who keep the law being called great in the kingdom of heaven in future tense, not past tense. He declares that our righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees who were professional law-keepers.

The Torah contains 613 commandments. What the Jews learned from Babylon is that they did not do a good enough job keeping these, so they added 3000 laws and then later expanded to 6000 laws which they canonized. The idea here is not legalism in the sense of taking control of their righteousness. This was born out of a deep devotion and desire to honor and obey God. These expansions were intended to serve as a fence so that the 613 at the center were protected and, therefore, more likely to be fulfilled. If we don't break the fence or don't go too far inside the fence, then we won't break Torah.

However impressive or imposing that may appear, Jesus says you must do more and do better! It is a strong theological truth that we are made righteous through the blood of Jesus, but that is not found here. Jesus offered no qualifications to this statement. Good Friday and Easter are a long way off. Jesus is not talking about salvation here. He is talking about discipleship, or what life looks like for those within the effective range of God's will – his kingdom.

There is not a better law, but there is a better righteousness.

What is the law?

We immediately think of Leviticus and blood sacrifices and altars and priests and legalism – the 613 things that must be done. But Jesus did not wear priest's robes and make sacrifices on altars, yet he fulfilled the law. Later, of course, he would offer himself as the final blood sacrifice once for all and establish his role as our great High Priest.

When asked which was the greatest commandment (i.e., law), his answer was familiar to them and to us quoting from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. Love God and love your neighbor.

Matthew 22:40

“On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

We mistakenly look at the Law as the source of righteousness under the Old Covenant replaced by God's grace in the New Covenant. But it was never intended to be the **source** of righteousness.

Genesis 15:6

And (Abraham) believed the Lord, and (God) counted it to him as righteousness.

Rather, from the beginning, the law was intended as the **course** of righteousness, or kingdom living. That is the key! The Old Covenant has been superseded by the New (see Jeremiah 31:31-34 quoted in full in Hebrews 8:8-12), but the **source** of righteousness has not changed, and the **course** of righteousness has not changed.

“There is no fulfillment of the law apart from communion with God [the **source**], and no communion with God apart from fulfillment of the law [the **course**]. To forget the first condition was the mistake of the Jews, and to forget the second the temptation of the disciples.” (Bonhoeffer)

Fulfilled, not Abolished

Jesus clearly states in v17 that he came to fulfill and not abolish the law. He did not come to “accomplish” the law. He did not have 613 checkboxes to tick off one by one. He was not a woman, so the laws related to cleanness and the menstrual cycle would be impossible to “fulfill”. We see in Hebrews that Jesus took the role of our once-for-all high priest, but that was still a future role at this point. What did Jesus mean by ‘fulfill’ and ‘abolish’ here?

In Jesus’ rabbinic world, to fulfill meant to correctly interpret and to live out that interpretation faithfully. To abolish meant either to interpret incorrectly or to fail to live out the correct interpretation.

Therefore, Jesus’ fulfilling the law means that his interpretation of the Scriptures completes and clarifies God’s original intent and meaning. This is what Jesus teaches in the SM, and this is what he lives out in front of his disciples throughout his ministry.

An important implication here is that the Old Testament is in full force today. Not the Old Covenant, mind you. The Old Testament is just as much God’s word as the New. It reflects his full character, nature, and will just as Jesus did as the Word made flesh.

“The entire Old Testament is the expression of God’s will, but it is to be obeyed and taught from the perspective of how Jesus “fulfills” it through his interpretation of its intent and meaning.” (Wilkins)

The Heart of the Matter

Let’s return now to that most shocking statement.

20 “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

For arguments sake, let’s say the Pharisees upheld their interpretation of the law perfectly. Yet, Jesus later calls the Pharisees white-washed tombs, clean on the outside but dead on the inside. His point was that external appearances are not the point. What Jesus is about to expound upon in the SM is that the battle is waged in the mind ...

Romans 12:2

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind ...

... but the war is for the heart.

This idea was not new. The Jews knew that righteousness is rooted in the heart. David prayed in Psalm 51, “Create in me a clean heart” after his great sin with Bathsheba.

Simply put, righteousness, the keeping of the law, is an inside-out affair. It is an internal state, not an external action. Reversing this was the great error of the Pharisees.

“As the disciple continues to respond obediently to the Word of God taught and preached by Jesus and energized by the Spirit, the newly transformed heart directs the transformation of the person from the inside to the outside. The heart-will of the person in the power of the indwelling Spirit directs the renewing of the mind, the disciplining of the body, and the purifying of social relations.” (Wilkins)

“Jesus knew that we cannot keep the law by trying to keep the law. To succeed in keeping the law one must aim at something other and something more. One must aim to become the kind of person from whom the deeds of the law naturally flow. The apple tree naturally and easily produces apples because of its inner nature. This is the most crucial thing to remember.” (Willard)

Discipleship is inside-out transformation. That is the key to understanding the SM. This is not accomplished by our own doing. It is accomplished by God in us as we seek to know him and rest in him. Rest and act, both at the same time. Every day. That is the path of the disciple.

The SM reverses the reversal of the Pharisees. That is, it puts what we are supposed to be back in front of what we are supposed to do for what we do comes forth from what we are. The SM describes the life of the disciple who is living under the rule of the King.

Transformation is made possible and motivated by the work of Jesus on our behalf. Such transformation and living out the SM is possible and accessible and imperative for us today. This is not just for the spiritual elite or professional Christians. Finally, this is the means of abundant life.

Questions

How has your understanding of the Law been impacted by this lesson?

Given the clarity of Jesus as the means and source of righteousness, to what extent have you ignored the course of righteousness (love God and neighbor)?

In what ways have you carried the mindset of a Pharisee, seeking to please God and look good on the outside without first being transformed on the inside?

What, if any, steps do you regularly take to know Jesus and rest in him?

What, if any, steps do you take to act out your discipleship? What is your motivation for those actions?

Lesson 4 – Intent of the Law I (Matthew 5:21-26)

Where We've Been

Jesus begins the SM by declaring that the kingdom is available to all. The least likely among you are included in the invitation. In fact, it is these ordinary people who are the light and salt of the world as they live the blessed life of kingdom discipleship.

Jesus then turns to what life in the kingdom looks like. We are saved by grace, but many are content to stop there. Life-changing and world-changing discipleship seems too hard and too much. Jesus calls us to demonstrate righteousness that surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, and this notion is centered around a correct interpretation and living out the law. Jesus did not abolish the law. He fulfilled the law by interpreting and living it out as it was originally and always intended.

We are not bound by the law for the sake of justification and salvation. However, that does not mean that we no longer need to live up to its intended standards for life and conduct, especially in relationships. The law (the Torah, writings, and prophets) was given to teach us how to interact with God and other people as Jesus is about to unfold.

To call the SM a sermon is to imply that there is single vein of thought, a central theme or point that is driven home throughout. This implication is correct. It is critical that we think of the SM as a whole and not succumb to the temptation to isolate certain parts to make familiar points. We must keep the whole in mind and pay attention to the sequence of thought that Jesus builds. This will become clearer the further we go.

Willard: "Repent, for life in the kingdom of the heavens is now one of your options." The separate parts of the discourse are to be interpreted in the light of this single purpose. They are not to be read as one disconnected statement after another. One must discern the overall plan of life within which the separate parts of the discourse make sense."

The core, dual emphases are inside-out righteousness, or the heart, and people, people, people.

Anger

Jesus now turns to six specific examples from the law and his interpretations. This, Jesus says, is what fulfilling the law looks like. He is going to explain the intended meaning of "do not murder", "do not commit adultery", etc. He starts with the most fundamental aspect of relationships.

²¹ "You have heard that it was said to those of old, You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire."

This is the negative side, or the 'do not's' side. We will start with that.

What Anger Is and Does

Anger is a response toward someone or something that has interfered with you and thwarted your desire at some level. The primary function of anger is to alert you to an obstruction to your will and spark resistance before you even have time to think about it.

Anger inherently includes a will to harm, or the beginnings thereof. Some degree of malice is contained in anger. A refusal to look at someone or a raised voice is intended to push back, to do harm, to murder. That is why Paul says ...

[Colossians 3:8](#)

[But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.](#)

Anger is not necessarily sinful or murderous. There is such a thing as righteous anger.

[Ephesians 4:26](#)

[Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.](#)

By the way, this is not a literal timetable. It simply means to not let your anger fester and degenerate into bitterness. After all, in northern Alaska, the sun does not go down for months.

Like other temptations. It becomes sin only when we indulge it or embrace it. Sadly, we do this far more than we indulge other temptations. That is why this is the first internal issue that Jesus is addressing.

The counter to righteous anger is self-righteous, not unrighteous, anger. It takes a level of self-righteousness to keep anger alive. Yet we are told today that we must be angry, that it is necessary to be angry to oppose social evil. In the 2016 election cycle, Bernie Sanders declared, "You should be angry. Take your anger out on the right people." On the flip side, it was commented that many conservatives were "mad as hell, and they don't want to sit down and take it anymore."

Our politicians have realized that the simplest path to power is to humor everyone's anger. Anger feels good, and it feels even better when someone tells you that you're not wrong to be angry in the first place. The natural results of this are bubbling all around us. Self-righteous anger only begets escalating self-righteous anger from the other side, and society spirals downward.

Anger quickly leads to insults, or verbal desecration, which further leads to contempt, and contempt, unlike anger, is never justifiable or good. It is the purposeful, conscious degradation of the worth of another human being. This is what Jesus referenced with "you fool!" Frankly, 'stupid', 'idiot', and the like should be completely removed from our vocabulary. It always betrays that we are not fulfilling the law.

Willard: "Filthy language and name calling are always an expression of contempt. The current swarm of filthy language floats upon the sea of contempt in which our society is now adrift."

Arthur Brooks, with whom I am not familiar, wrote a book titled *Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America from the Culture of Contempt* which was quoted

at length in a National Review editorial. He stated that "America is addicted to political contempt." He defines contempt as "anger mixed with disgust. ... These two emotions form a toxic combination, like ammonia mixed with bleach" which produces a poisonous vapor. In the words of the 19th-century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, contempt is "the unsullied conviction of the worthlessness of another."

We can be angry at someone without denying their worth, but this is not true when anger is fostered into contempt. Contempt makes it easier to hurt, disrespect and degrade. Contempt crowds out love and blocks or destroys relationships. We have an innate need for belonging, for community, and contempt rips that away. It stabs at a person's soul and deflates the power of their life. Thus, anger and contempt are withering to the human soul.

That is murder, and this is what "do not murder" speaks against from the beginning.

The Positive Side

But Jesus is not done unpacking this command. There is 'do' side (of course, we are learning what to 'be', not 'do'). Jesus takes the prohibition and turns it into proactive expectations.

²³ "So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. ²⁶ Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny."

Jesus takes the command "do not murder" and expands it to "be reconciled."

Be reconciled before you worship. God would rather you be reconciled in your relationships first so that your worship may be honest and true .

Be reconciled before you go to court. Don't give up. If all efforts have failed, even on the way court, keep trying. Don't give up on reconciliation until you have exhausted all options.

In Jesus' mind, this all comes from "do not murder". This is what "do not murder" always meant. This was always the expectation. God gave you the command "do not murder" so that, through the Torah, you would learn how to be reconciled to your brother, to restore and maintain relationships.

There is nothing that can be done with anger that cannot be done better without it. The answer is to right the wrong in persistent love, not to harbor anger, and thus to right the real or imaginary wrong without adding further wrongs.

[Proverbs 15:1](#)

[A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.](#)

The Heart of the Matter

At the heart of this teaching of Jesus is a revelation of the preciousness of human beings. He means to reveal the value of persons. Obviously merely not killing others cannot begin to do justice to that.

Jesus is not upping the ante. He is not establishing a new, deeper (and harder) set of laws nor is he adding to the law. He is clarifying, with authority, what the original law was getting at the entire time, from the beginning.

The examples of reconciliation are examples of what assigning value to others or demonstrating respect and positive regard to our neighbors looks like.

By seeking reconciliation, or restoration of relationship, with one opposing you, you stand within the reality of God's kingdom. Further, this may well draw your adversary into it also. To be of a kindly or favorable mind toward an adversary or anyone else does not mean to do what they demand. It means to be genuinely committed to what is good for them. That is love walked out.

Willard: "Standing in the kingdom, we make responsible decisions in love, with assurance that how things turn out for us does not really matter that much because, in any case, we are in the kingdom of the heavens. In that kingdom nothing that can happen to us is the end of the world."

How does real change in our character regarding anger (and everything else) come about? It is the transforming power of God at work in us as we press to know him and as we rest in him.

Questions

In what way, if any, has this teaching altered your understanding of "do not murder"?

Our society is practically saturated with contempt. In what ways and to what degree are you a participant in this downward spiral?

When was the last time you thought to yourself or called someone "stupid" or "idiot" or the like? Include what you think or say in the car!

Has your anger ever yielded genuine, lasting, positive results? Whether you answer is "yes" or "no", may there have been a better way and a better result?

Share examples of reconciliation from your experience. How did that come about?

Lesson 5 – Intent of the Law II –(Matthew 5:27-37)

Review / Sequence

Let's review and note the sequence or train of thought being laid down in the SM thus far. We don't want to lose this as we consider individual sections of the sermon.

Jesus is calling a new people of God out of the world and teaching them what it means to be children of the King – to be disciples.

Jesus began with the Beatitudes teaching that the kingdom of God is available to all, even to those who, in our judgment, don't deserve it.

If we walk out this radical openness, we will be met with opposition, but we will also bring flavor and vividness, salt and light, to the world.

Jesus then moves to the central religious concept of his hearers saying he came to interpret, teach, and walk out what the law was intended to mean from the beginning. In this way, his is fulfilling and not abolishing the law.

He concludes his introduction with the core imperative of the sermon. Our righteousness must exceed or surpass that of the professional law-keepers, the Pharisees.

This must have been impossible for Jesus' hearers to grasp. Certainly, he knew this so Jesus then laid out intentional, sequential, practical examples of what fulfilling the law will look like in people who live under the effective range of God's will, or his kingdom. In each example, the central issue is the inward heart and the how the heart motivations are manifested in relationships.

Thus, two words that capture the thrust of Jesus' message: heart and people.

Jesus was not upping the ante or adding to the law with these examples. He was not laying down a new or higher moral code. He was explaining what the law was always intended to communicate and how it was always intended to be lived out.

He started with "do not murder" and showed that this called for much more: no self-righteous anger, no hostility or contempt whatsoever, no insults, and an eagerness for reconciliation and restoration of relationships.

Jesus treats anger and hostility at greater length than any of the other matters he takes up. This is because it is the most fundamental destructive force in relationships to be confronted. With this most central relational element in mind and in place, Jesus then moves to five additional examples that build on that foundation. We will tackle the next three in this lesson and the final two in the lesson following.

Lust

²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, You shall not commit adultery.' ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away.

For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.”

Again, Jesus is not upping the ante from acts of adultery to lust. This is not a new layer of laws. Rather, he is clarifying and exposing how our attitudes and actions related to sex dehumanize people. Lust, like adultery itself, is using others for your own selfish gratification. The person is reduced to an object of desire, and you are turned to a beast driven by your impulses. “Instead of trusting to the unseen, we prefer the tangible fruits of desire, and so we fall from the path of discipleship.” (Bonhoeffer)

This does not mean that adultery is acceptable if the act is consensual or based out of some form of supposed ‘love’. The most basic meaning of “do not commit adultery” still stands. Just as physical murder is thoroughly destructive, adultery is destructive as well. At its heart, this command protects the deepest of human relationships, that between a husband and wife. And, of course, the consequences and negative impact of adultery as defined here spreads far beyond just the two selfish creatures involved.

I was once walking by a Hooters restaurant with a co-worker which prompted him to say how the wife of a friend of his would say, “I don’t care where you get your appetite as long as you eat at home.” Such license is 100% wrong. Any lustful gaze at a woman other than your wife or a man other than your husband degrades the one you have committed yourself to before God in the most sacred bond. You have, in a sense, declared them insufficient. They are not enough, but God always gives us enough.

There is a difference between seeing beauty and making that beauty an object of your desire or obsession. I see beautiful women every day. The world is absolutely loaded with beautiful women and stunning, handsome men. Just go to a gym! But when it comes to seeking intimacy, I have no eyes for anyone other than my beautiful wife. That is a conscious choice. That choice avoids endless worlds of trouble and pain, and in fact produces just the opposite.

Just as anger is not wrong in and of itself, so neither is desire. We must be careful not to turn the law into a tool of self-condemnation which is just another way of assuming the role of God for ourselves. Jesus takes aim here at the purposeful self-gratification by the use of another and at the expense of others.

Then there is this talk about tearing out eyes and cutting off hands. Jesus is addressing the notion that sexual desire can be controlled by the law. If you rely on the law for your righteousness, if your doing is central and not your inner being, you have no choice but to go to any and all extremes to ensure you obey the law. That means, if you are serious about this, you must cut off your hand or gouge out your eye if they pose any risk to your breaking the law.

This again exposes the insufficiency of the external action and the need to focus on the internal heart. The deeper question always concerns who you are, not what you did do or can do.

Would you do it if you could? Whatever it is, eliminating body parts will not change that heart attitude and inclination.

Divorce

³¹ “It was also said, Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’

³² But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

This passage has been used to ostracize people who go through divorce. Carol and I once hosted a minister and his wife. It was the second marriage for each. At that point, their past was their past. They were a wonderful couple deeply committed to loving others and sharing the Gospel. They told us that when they were considering getting married, they were counseled that they must be prepared to face rejection from many in the church. For a minister, that meant unemployment, and indeed that had been the case at times.

Divorce is a human tragedy, but beware. A graceless, merciless world is an ugly thing. To those divorced among us whether for good reasons or bad (that is for God to judge), a good and abundant life is still available in God’s kingdom.

Using this passage in this way is, in fact, in direct opposition to what Jesus was actually teaching. Jesus has not shifted gears to some disconnected topic. This is still about how we treat people and our heart motivations behind that treatment.

Jesus’ statement regarding divorce was directed at the practice of his day that left divorced women destitute. A man was justified in divorcing his wife if she burned or over-salted the man’s steak or even if he simply saw another women that pleased him more. In such circumstances, he was viewed as free of her, justified, and even kind if he simply granted her a certificate of divorce. This was an act of kindness because it provided her proof that she was free to remarry without being accused of adultery.

Jesus is condemning such a practice by declaring two things. First, the woman is not free with the point being that the self-justified man has offered no such kindness as he supposed. Second, the man is guilty of adultery himself which, of course, is a clear violation of the law even as understood by all men in that day.

A note about sequence: How many divorces would occur if anger and obsessive desire were eliminated from the human heart?

Oaths

³³ “Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.”

Bonhoeffer put it succinctly: “The very existence of oaths is a proof that there are such things as lies.” This is about open-handed truthfulness.

In Jesus’ day, there was an oath system of loopholes used to wiggle out of promises. “I promise by the temple.” “I promise by the gold of the temple.” Because the second oath

supersedes the first, I am no longer bound by the first promise. Thus, you could escape keeping your word. Again, Jesus is calling out the impact of our behavior on other people. You are self-justified by keeping your highest oath but you have still mistreated your neighbor.

Further, oaths are used to manipulate the decisions and choices of others. Swearing an oath presents an urgency and sincerity that is often not genuine. We swear in order to impress others with our reliability as a means of pushing aside their right of choice and decision-making. It is a method for getting our way. It is a subtle means of robbing our neighbor of his ability to judge and choose on his own.

By simply letting our 'yes' be 'yes' and our 'no' be 'no', we accomplish two things. First, we establish the value of our word, or our integrity. We never need to start a statement with, "I'll be honest with you ..." as if there was a viable alternative. Second, we respect the soul-need of human beings to make their own judgments and decisions solely from what they have concluded is best. Thus, we convey dignity and value to the other person. We open the door to fellowship and genuine brotherhood.

Relevance

How relevant is the SM? Well, how common today are murder, adultery, and divorce? Seems pretty relevant.

We either take aim at our external behavior and live lives of frustration and dented dashboards, or we take aim at resting and knowing and allow the Holy Spirit to transform us by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2). Mind and heart go together. Fill your mind with things of God, and he will transform your heart. Then setting aside anger and lust and the rest will be easy because it will be natural.

Questions

What is the sequence of thought in the Sermon on the Mount thus far? Restate in your own words. How has each "point" in the sermon built on what came before?

How do you handle your sexual desire under the onslaught of our sex-crazed culture? (Feel free to comment or move on.)

Excuses for divorce such as a burned meal sound silly, or does it? Restate the principle behind this teaching regarding divorce. What has this taught you about how you read 1st-century literature from a 21st-century perspective?

Is your word your bond? Does your 'yes' mean yes and your 'no' mean no? Share examples of how the level of integrity of others has impacted you, either positively or negatively.

Lesson 6 – Intent of the Law III (Matthew 5:38-48)

As we continue going through Jesus' examples of how to properly interpret and live out the original intent of the law, keep in mind the two words that capture the thrust of Jesus' message: heart (fed by the mind and emotions) and people (relationships).

Retaliation

³⁸ “You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹ And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.”

“Eye for an eye” is found in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. For example, ...

Leviticus 24:17-20

¹⁷ “Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death. ¹⁸ Whoever takes an animal's life shall make it good, life for life. ¹⁹ If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, ²⁰ fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him.

This is the “law of retaliation” which was established as a check against inappropriate punishment and escalation. It was intended as an equalizer of justice. This was a sanction for governmental judgment but not personal revenge on any level.

Leviticus 19:18

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself ...

But living under the heavy boot of Roman rule made this very difficult. Theirs was an oppressive occupation. Injustice cries out for retaliation and then some. Escalation can come quickly.

But Jesus teaches that, on a personal level, the disciple's first responsibility is to reverse the dynamic of the situation from taking to giving. Remembering sequence, anger no longer controls our responses. When we are treated unjustly, that mistreatment no longer becomes all that matters. We have a larger view. Our life is God's and is in his hands. We see the offender as more than the offense against us. We recognize his humanity. We understand his enslavement to sin and self. We see him under God and as one to whom God's grace and forgiveness are available.

Jesus then gives four examples, the first of which gets a LOT of attention.

Turn the Other Cheek

Which cheek? You've been struck on the right cheek by the right hand. The left was reserved for potty purposes. So, you have been backhanded. This was a demeaning,

symbolic action of dishonor. This was how you hit someone of a lower class. It was humiliating and dehumanizing. By turning the left cheek, you are saying, “if you are going to hit me, hit me like a fellow human being. At least grant me that level of respect.”

This highlights the injustice. Recall the civil rights movement and Martin Luther King Jr.’s non-violent resistance. This had powerful and redemptive effects. Our tormentors expect and even rely on an angry response to justify their actions and support their continued abuse. Responding quietly and kindly strips away their moral control if not physical control. Their certainty of their own rightness is broken. This may give them pause to consider what they have done and choose a different way. It opens the door for reconciliation vs. escalation.

This is not a call to pacifism. Jesus is not saying let them hit you again. He is not saying to hit back either. This is not a universal call to lay down at all costs. This is especially not a call to leave others vulnerable. Self-defense is good when warranted, but it takes wisdom to discern when that is. Retaliation makes you an equal aggressor and so is never warranted. Self-defense does not.

A word about war: Wars are governmental affairs. Jesus said to not resist “the one who is evil.” He did not say to not resist evil itself. “Turn the other cheek” is talking about one-on-one personal interactions and how we treat other people in our responses to them. War is another matter.

The clear rule is that there is never room for personal retaliation and revenge. Instead, reconciliation should always be our goal.

Three More Examples

In the next example, you are being sued for the clothes on your back. Obviously then, you have nothing else. So, if they want your outer layer of clothes, which is all you have left, just give them the next layer as well in order to expose the injustice.

The third example was the right of a Roman soldier to force you into temporary service, specifically here to carry his pack for one mile. They were not allowed to push you beyond one mile. Jesus said to do this and more. At the one-mile marker, there is this awkward moment when the soldier says stop but you keep going. “Wait. Stop. You’ll get me in trouble.” Getting them in trouble is not the point. Exposing the abuse is the point. You are saying that you will not play their game their way. Rather, you will give more than they are ever willing to give. It is provocative, and it can change hearts.

Finally, give to those who ask without qualification. If the request has an ulterior motive hidden behind it, God sees that. Let him sort that out. Be generous.

Lack of escalation is good, but the best fulfillment is to expose the injustice for what it is without responding in kind. This makes reconciliation possible.

It is important to remember that these are not new laws. Turning these into legalistic Christian standards is to miss the point entirely. Jesus is showing what living out the law already in place looks like, and he has given illustrations of what a kingdom-minded person will characteristically do in specific situations.

Every circumstance is different and requires judgment to determine the appropriate response. Jesus did not say this would be easy. Legalism is the easy path of not thinking and, therefore, no responsibility. Jesus' way is harder but better. Our dignity and humanity as well as that of all we come in contact with will remain intact.

Love Your Enemies

Now we come to the culmination of these teachings, the peak of the progression.

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'
⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?
⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?"

Here, for the first time in the SM and Gospel of Matthew as a whole, we meet the word that sums up the SM: "love".

This law, "love your neighbor and hate your enemies," is not found in the Torah. It was not found in any ancient Jewish writings until it was discovered in the Dead Sea Scrolls. This is a reference to Essene philosophy which was apparently well accepted.

The Rule of the Community found at Qumran contains the following: "that they may love all the sons of light, each according to his lot in God's design, and hate all the sons of darkness, each according to his guilt in God's vengeance."

But Jesus calls for the opposite response to those who openly despise us and fantasize about our pain and destruction. Aside from personal examples, Iran and the Middle East easily come to mind. Jesus calls for prayerful response, to pray for them, not for their pain and destruction. Jesus takes this to the most personal level. Pray for those who persecute you! This is not theoretical.

We are to recognize our enemies, and the enemies of the Gospel in general, for what they are: erring, devastated, and bewildered souls desperately in need of grace.

When we do this, we reflect our Father's likeness. The translation here is poor because it reads like works righteousness again – do this so that ... Rather, do this in order to reflect God's heart and character. He simply wants us to be like him. God sends sunshine and rain on the just and unjust. In other words, the good and bad alike will experience the same things in life, only we are to respond differently.

Jesus then points out that if we don't love our enemies, there is nothing that truly distinguishes us from anyone else. The evil and the good love their friends. Who cares? Both Jews and Gentiles warmly greet their brothers. So what? There is nothing striking about that love. There is nothing unique.

But God called Israel to be different. They were to be a kingdom of priests, and a key part of the job of a priest is to put God on display in such a way that others stop and take notice and are drawn to him. They and we are to show the world what God is like. Love that loves enemies is truly different. This sets us apart. This makes us like God.

Romans 5:6-8

⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— ⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

We were God's self-declared enemies. In our sin, we resisted and rejected God. In the face of that hostility or, at best, ambivalence, Jesus gave himself anyway.

Be Holy (not Perfect)

⁴⁸ "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

The translation 'perfect' is terribly misleading. We cannot be perfect, so the typical translation purports a hopeless calling. 'Perfect' is what the Greek word means, but 'holy' is what Jesus, who was not speaking Greek, actually said. (Some argue that the Gospel of Matthew was originally written in Hebrew, but that is for another day). This is a quote from ...

Leviticus 19:1-2

¹ And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ² "Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy."

We are called to be different and show that our God is different. What sets God apart? Among many other infinities, his holiness. Holy means to be set apart. "Take off your sandals for you are standing on holy ground."

We cannot be perfect, but we can be holy. We can be set apart and different. We are to set our affections on things above, not on things upon the earth (Colossians 3:1-3). This is what Jesus is calling us to be. To love our neighbors, our friends, and our enemies is the greatest example of that and is what the Torah was designed to teach us.

All of this is about the heart, the seat of not just our emotions but our entire life force. It is about our internal motivations towards other people and not our external behavior

We either take aim at our external behavior and live lives of frustration, or we take aim at resting and knowing Jesus and allow the Holy Spirit to transform us by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2). The mind informs the heart. Fill your mind with the things of God, and he will transform your heart. Then loving your enemies will be easy because it will be natural.

Questions

What are some examples of escalation in retaliation, either from fiction or real life? (*The Godfather* comes to mind.) Do you resonate with, or recoil from, the escalation?

What does it mean to turn the other cheek?

Think of someone who may qualify as your enemy. Do you love them? Who and what can you draw upon to develop a sincere love?

Are you perfect? (No) Are you holy? (Yes) Is all of this possible?

Lesson 7 – Reputation (Matthew 6:1-18)

The SM has provided answers to two key questions of life,

Who is really well off? One is blessed if one's life is based upon acceptance of and intimate interactions with the King as a subject of his kingdom.

Who is a genuinely good person? Those who, from the deepest levels of their understanding and motivation, are committed to promoting the good of everyone they deal with including God and themselves.

The first half of the SM is about how to correctly interpret the law as it was always intended. Now we come to the second half where Jesus talks about how, if he is correct, his interpretation is lived out in the details of three primary arenas of everyday life: public religious life (6:1–18), personal interior life (6:19–34), and interpersonal relationships (7:1–12). We will cover these in five lessons starting with this one.

The first two lessons address the two main things that will block or hinder a life of constant interaction with God and healthy growth in the kingdom. These are the desire to have the approval of others and for our piety to be recognized, and the desire to secure ourselves by means of material wealth. These deal with our social and financial motivations, or the true intentions of the heart.

Kingdom Living in Public

¹ “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.”

This is the core point related to public religious life which was far more significant and comprehensive at the time of the SM. The more general point is to guard against putting your reputation above all else. Don't do things with the motivation of wanting to look good in the eyes of others. “In order to” is a phrase referring to motivation.

Jesus then tackles three areas of common religious practice in his day: giving to the needy, public prayer, and fasting.

Giving to the Needy

² “Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

We need to pause and talk about three things that carry through all three examples: hypocrites, reward, and secrecy.

Hypocrites

The Greek word translated 'hypocrites' means actor. This is one who performs or puts on a show. They act out to be seen and applauded by others. This whole section is draped in theater language.

We think of hypocrisy as saying one thing but doing another. That is not Jesus' meaning. You can, in fact, say one thing and do that exact thing and be a hypocrite if what you are saying and doing is all a show to be seen by others, if it's all an act.

The Pharisees were hypocrites in that their religious piety was a show both for God and to be seen as devout in public. They are doing exactly what they intended and exactly what they said. They were driven by desire for what they considered to be a good reputation.

This refers to external action versus the heart motivation behind that action.

Reward

Our motivation is determined by what we want and expect from our action. When we do good deeds to be seen by human beings, our reward is a present-tense thing. For the hypocrite, or actor putting on a show to be seen, the reward is immediate approval and ongoing positive reputation among those whose opinion they care about.

"And guess what. They are seen by other people. That is the reward they wanted. They got it. The entire operation lay within the range of human competence. Because they had not involved God in what they were doing, he does not intrude on their project. They are at the level of pharisaical righteousness, which never "enters the kingdom. "The ego swells, and the soul shrivels." (Willard)

So, what about our Father's reward? We typically think of this as a future thing such as a crown or a particular place in heaven, but that is out of context. Jesus is talking about the benefits of our behavior here and now. The use of the word 'will' is only a limitation of English. It is not, "I will reward you in the future." It is, "I will reward you now." Yet, still, the timeline is not obvious.

Our reward is the inner transformation of our character to be in line with the way God designed us relationally. This, in turn, results in the abundant life we experience when we do things God's way. Things just work. It is inside-out righteousness coming to be.

In Secret

The reference to giving in secret is not literally so that no one sees. Rather, it is the motivation behind the action. We are to act with such an outward focus that our left hand is not even aware of the actions of the right and vice versa. This idea of the two hands not being aware of each other speaks to the unconscious nature of true piety. "Christ's virtue, the virtue of discipleship, can only be accomplished so long as you are entirely unconscious of what you are doing." (Bonhoeffer)

We are not hiding our righteousness from others. We are hiding it from ourselves. This is the reality of your discipleship only insofar as you look unto Jesus. Then it will seem not extraordinary, but quite ordinary and natural.

With this idea of secrecy, Jesus appears to be contradicting his earlier teaching in ...

Matthew 5:16

¹⁶ “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

Likewise, Paul later wrote ...

1 Timothy 4:15

Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress.

These seem to contradict the directive to give in secret, but perhaps we should give Jesus more credit and assume he is not contradicting himself. Before, Jesus was talking about letting others see the blessedness of the kingdom of God in order to draw them in. Here, disciples’ motive in performing public acts of piety is at issue. It is about whose glory is being sought, ours or our Father’s.

Those motivated by reputation and approval of others figuratively sound a trumpet blast – they toot their own horn. This is in reference to the announcement that the famous actor is now on the stage. The actor would typically be in mask or makeup to exaggerate their appearance but hide his identity, so a short blast on a trumpet would let the audience know that the famous actor was now on stage.

Prayer

Now we come to the second example.

⁵ “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

We see the same pattern in this example with reference to actors (hypocrisy) and reward and secrecy.

Regarding the room with the shut door, or the prayer closet, this would be understood at that time to be a prayer shawl as Jewish homes would not typically have private rooms or closets (see image below). Sarah Wesley, mother of 19, would routinely pull her apron over her head when she prayed to block out distractions and signal her children to leave her be.



Of course, even in our prayer closets, whatever they may be, we can put on quite a show for ourselves. This again emphasizes the need for unconscious righteousness.

Jesus then references pagan prayers which could be extremely mindless and repetitious all with a motive of manipulating the gods through many words.

⁷ “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. ⁹ Pray then like this:

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

¹⁰ Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread,

¹² and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,

¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

Contrary to what I had always understood, the Lord’s prayer was a common, everyday prayer called the Amidah prayer. What Jesus recited was already well-known to his disciples and all those who heard. Jesus is simply saying, “You already know how to pray.”

But, with that said, Jesus did add one thing that blew the minds of his hearers. You will have to wait until the next lesson to find out what that is. Maybe you can find it in the interim. Much more attention to the Lord’s prayer is warranted, but I have chosen to leave such a study for you to pursue on your own or for another class in the future.

Fasting

The third and final example of public religious life is fasting or abstaining from food or something else for the purpose of heightening our focus on God and his work in our lives. It is a spiritual discipline generally neglected in our day.

¹⁶ “And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Again, we see the same pattern in this example with reference to actors and reward and secrecy.

We are bound to our bodies, and this is good and by God’s design. While our flesh is corrupted by sin, God’s redemptive answer is not to abuse or escape our body but to bring it under control. This requires conscious effort. Fasting and prayer are important elements of that effort. When the desires of our flesh, our bodies, are under control, we are better able to renounce ourselves in the service of others.

“As soon as a Christian recognizes that he has failed in his service, that his readiness has become feeble, and that he has sinned against another’s life and become guilty of another’s guilt, that all his joy in God has vanished and that his capacity for prayer has quite gone, it is high time for him to launch an assault upon the flesh, and prepare for better service by fasting and prayer.” (Bonhoeffer)

For more on fasting, there are abundant resources available, though I have no specific recommendations.

“Whatever our position in life, if our lives and works are to be of the kingdom of God, we must not have human approval as a primary or even major aim. We must lovingly allow people to think whatever they will. We may, if it seems right, occasionally try to help them understand us and appreciate what we are doing. That could be an act of love. But in any case, we can only serve them by serving the Lord only.” (Willard)

Questions

What is a hypocrite as understood in Sermon on the Mount? How have you acted as a hypocrite?

What is your reward? How have you received your reward already, either positively or negatively?

Do you have a secret place to pray? Do you use it? Think in Jesus’ terms here.

How much do you think about your reputation? Whose opinion of you matters most? How malleable or fixed is God’s opinion of you?

Lesson 8 – Forgiveness / What We See (Matthew 6:19-24)

No part of the Sermon on the Mount is an isolated teaching but part of a continuing, building whole. The central theme is living in the light of God's kingdom which is another way of saying "trust the story". The central emphasis is the motivations of our hearts in our interactions with people – how we treat and respond to others. Jesus deals with attitudes and perspectives that hinder relationships. The last lesson was about reputation and how we conduct ourselves around other people, either with a focus on honoring God or honoring ourselves. Jesus now moves to treasure and perspective and money.

But first, a word about the Lord's prayer from the last lesson and a profound teaching (at least for me).

Forgiveness

There is one significant twist to Jesus's sample prayer compared to the common Amidah prayer on which it is based. It is an addition that Jesus added which is not found in any Jewish Amidah prayer before or since. That addition is the phrase "as we forgive our debtors". This makes no sense to the Jewish mind. Only God can forgive. "I hope God forgives me. I hope he forgives you." But forgiveness is God's business alone. The radical addition is God inviting us to participate in the divine action.

Jesus gives us a big clue as to the addition by his extra emphasis on this idea at the end of the prayer.

¹⁴ "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

This participation in the divine action is drawn out in the following quote from Timothy Keller's *The Reason for God*:

"Forgiveness means refusing to make them pay for what they did. However, to refrain from lashing out at someone when you want to do so with all your being is agony. It is a form of suffering. You not only suffer the original loss of happiness, reputation, and opportunity, but now you forgo the consolation of inflicting the same on them. You are absorbing the debt, taking the cost of it completely on yourself instead of taking it out on the other person. It hurts terribly. Many people would say it feels like a kind of death. Yes, but it is a death that leads to resurrection instead of the lifelong living death of bitterness and cynicism. ... No one "just" forgives, if the evil is serious. ... Everyone who forgives great evil goes through a death into a resurrection, and experiences nails, blood, sweat, and tears. ... **Everyone who forgives someone bears the other's sins.** ... Forgiveness is always a form of costly suffering."

Upon reading this, my mind went to a verse that has long perplexed me as to what it could possibly mean. I believe forgiveness is at least part of the answer.

Colossians 1:24

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.

Forgiveness is filling up what was lacking in Jesus' sufferings. Our forgiving is not adding to his rendering of salvation. Jesus alone is the mediator between man and God. Rather, it is the ongoing need for forgiveness in relationships and the need for demonstrations of forgiveness and the experience of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a significant form of trust.

Treasures

¹⁹ "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal."

Just like the idea of reward in the last lesson, there is a tendency to think of treasure in heaven as something whose benefits only come after death. But the treasure we have in heaven is also something very much available to us now. It is the life Jesus is describing throughout the SM. Eternal life has already begun, regardless of circumstances, for those who know Jesus.

John 17:3

"And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

What are treasures?

They are things we try to keep because of the value we place upon them. They may be of no value whatsoever themselves, yet we take great pains to protect such things. Thus, we are said to *treasure* them. We reveal what we treasure by what we try to protect, secure, and keep.

What are treasures in heaven? They are things of eternal worth. For the here and now, that means relationships with God and neighbor because only relationships carry forward into eternity. The first commandment is to love God above all other things, or to treasure God or hold him in our hearts as our greatest treasure.

Everyone has treasures. This is an essential part of what it is to be human. Treasures are directly connected to our spirit, or will, and thus to our dignity as persons. These treasures can be very good like a child's teddy bear or a keepsake that reminds us of lost loved ones or a thing or time or memory we are grateful for.

But this is not about the things we treasure so much as our *treasuring* of them. It has to do with the fundamental structure of our soul. What we treasure reflects our heart and also guides our heart. Our heart is bound to what we treasure.

²¹ "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

We might expect this sentence to run the other way, "Where your heart is, there your treasure will be also." But Jesus knows us better. His actual words are more profound.

Money affects the heart more than the heart decides how to handle money. Jesus' point is not "You tend to put your money into things that matter to you," rather, "the possessions you own will change you so that you care more about them than about other things." Our treasure focuses our heart. Therefore, choose carefully what you own, for you will inevitably begin to value and protect it.

Perhaps more importantly, choose carefully the things and people you invest in (whether in money or time or talents), because that's where your heart will be also. For example, when you invest money and prayer in a church or missionary or child, you are also investing your heart. Your well-being will be tied to theirs, and that's as it should be.

Perspective

Now we come to two extremely odd, cryptic verses.

²² "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, ²³ but if your eye is bad (unhealthy), your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!"

In Jewish thought and rabbinical history, the eye is a figurative reference to how we view the world. You either have a good eye or a bad eye. You see the world either in a positive light or a negative light.

This starts right in the very beginning of the Scriptures. Does your view of the world and humanity begin in Genesis 1 or Genesis 3? Does it begin with ...

Genesis 1:31a

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.

Or ...

Genesis 3:17

And to Adam he (God) said, "... cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life ...

Our perspective is typically steeped in Genesis 3 and sin and death and all that went wrong, and it is all true. But is that the primary lens through which God would have us see the world? Or, would God have us see through a good lens to the deeper reality of the goodness of God? Is the world, at its most fundamental state, a good creation or a bad creation? Is there potential, or is all lost?

The world is broken, yes, but the goodness of God still lies underneath, and Jesus came to put the world back together, and he does that through us. A good eye is required for us to be effective ambassadors for God's kingdom and effective stewards of God's grace.

Remember, the SM is about the heart, inside-out righteousness, and it is about people and how we treat one another. How you view the world comprehensively impacts who you are inwardly and how you act towards others.

The Greek words for healthy and unhealthy imply generosity and stinginess. When we see with a bad eye, we adopt a posture of scarcity. We are stingy towards others and

ourselves. There is no room for joy. I am totally flawed, broken, and worthless. But when we see the world in a generous light, we adopt a posture of abundance where joy can be nurtured and grow. Generosity towards others naturally flows because I know I am totally loved, valued, and accepted.

Money

Jesus has moved from treasures to perspective and now to money. Note the flow. Perspective is obviously tied to treasures and money which speaks to generosity.

²⁴ “No one can serve two masters, for 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 God and money.”

This is not about bank accounts and home equity. It is about generosity and hospitality.

Some time back, I spoke about my inherent pessimism and my rather negative view of optimism when that optimism is based on the goodness of humanity. In thinking through the extremes of pessimism and optimism, I coined the term “positive realism”. We are to be realistic about the state of the world – wise as serpents, innocent as doves. But, how can we be anything but positive in light of what God and done for us through Jesus and the obvious goodness of creation?

The definition of optimism that I embrace is the belief that goodness pervades reality, but only so long as the source of the goodness is God and not some humanistic ideal. There is no good but God, but he has infused that goodness in us. The world, and each human in it, has potential. God desires that all come to repentance, to turn back to him. He has made the way possible.

Therefore, store up treasures in heaven. Adopt a good eye seeing the world from a posture of abundance in God’s good creation. A bad eye resulted in Genesis 3-11. But that is only a small part of a much larger story. Choose to trust that story.

Questions

What is the impact of the teaching on forgiveness on your heart? Is there someone for whom you need to fill up what is lacking in Christ’s sufferings?

What things with no monetary value do you treasure? What keepsakes, etc.? Why are these important to you?

What is a treasure of yours that has negatively affected your heart and life?

Do you perceive the world as a good place or a bad place? On what truth do you base this perspective? Does your perspective need to change?

Lesson 9 – Worry (Matthew 6:25-34)

Where We've Been

In Matthew 6, Jesus turns from the examples of the law and how to properly understand and live it out in our relationships with others to our internal state of mind and heart. He dealt first with our concern over our reputation and what others think of us. He then dealt with what our heart most values, or our treasures.

Now he turns to the driving force of our daily existence, the provision of food and clothing. We know we need these things. God knows we need these things. But where will we turn to get them – self-reliance or trust in a good Heavenly Father? That is not to say we are not to work for our daily needs or even that we should not save for later years as Joseph did in Egypt or have a plan for the days ahead like the proverbial Proverbs 31 Woman. Rather, it speaks to our heart's motivation and trust.

Do we trust God as we go about our days? Our lips say, "Yes," but our worry says, "No."

Worry

Jesus starts with "therefore", so sequence is obviously in mind. This section immediately follows the warnings related to treasures on earth and money.

"Earthly possessions dazzle our eyes and delude us into thinking that they can provide security and freedom from anxiety. Yet all the time they are the very source of all anxiety. ... When we seek for security in possessions, we are trying to drive out care with care, and the net result is the precise opposite of our anticipations." (Bonhoeffer)

If we value money as normal people think we should, our fate is fixed. Our fate is anxiety. It is worry. It is frustration. Jesus counters with ...

²⁵ "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?"

What do we worry about? Much the same things as people have always worried about. Food, clothing, shelter, money, life and death. For those with no hope of an eternal future, staying alive on earth is by far the most important thing. They live their entire lives in bondage to fear of death, yet it does not add a single hour to their lives.

Jesus' hearers lived in a time much different than our own. Day to day existence was a daily concern or at least a seasonal concern. A failed harvest could bring famine. On the other hand, the temptation of materialism was well-known in Judaism. A heart-rending confession from the second century B.C. Testament of Judah states: "My children, love of money leads to idolatry, because once they are led astray by money, they designate

as gods those who are not gods. It makes anyone who has it go out of his mind. On account of money I utterly lost my children.”

Today, our stress tends not to come from lack of food or clothing but from the want of security, from knowing where our next 1000 meals are going to come from. We want to know today that we will be fed and comfortable for the rest of our lives. So, we use possessions as an insurance policy against tomorrow. “Anxiety is always directed to tomorrow, whereas goods are in the strictest sense meant to be used only for today.” (Bonhoeffer)



In the face of these worries, Jesus counsels us to consider the birds.

God knows every single one, and he feeds every single one. By way of a rhetorical question, Jesus says that we are more valuable than the birds, so of course our Father will provide for us as well.

God knows what we need, yet we allow ourselves to be consumed with what our

eyes can see and what our bodies compel us to pursue. We are back to the good eye or bad eye. Do we trust that the world is ultimately a perfectly safe place to be because God is good?

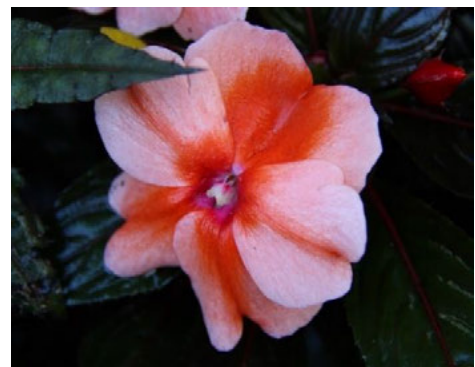
Psalms 23:6

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

I recognize how strange, even strained, this sounds. But that is only because the entire posture of our culture and our lives is habitually inclined toward physical reality as the only reality there is. The true spiritual reality is that God literally surrounds us. When you move your finger through the air, you are stroking God, so to speak. His Spirit dwells within us, but his presence is also all around us.

It almost feels like Jesus is pleading with us to wake up and smell the roses, or, in this case, lilies!

²⁸ “And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?”



“All of this about food and treasuring food, but of course some people would rather starve than look bad.” ☺

We are to avoid two extremes. One extreme is to deny all material concern to the point of asceticism. The other extreme is to think that making provision for future physical needs demonstrates a lack of faith. We are to trust God day to day for just enough as Israel was called to do with manna. We are to work hard and take what we find with gratitude.

“Be not anxious for the morrow.’ This is not to be taken as a philosophy of life or a moral law: it is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” (Bonhoeffer)

Seek God First

Now Jesus summarizes the treasure we should seek.

³¹ “Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

Seek first the kingdom of God, and **all** of these things **will** be added to you!

Do you believe it? This belief is born out of a first small step of faith and grows through experiencing God’s faithfulness, one provision at a time.

To “seek” is to search, chase, comb, delve, explore, hunt, investigate, prowl, pursue, scout, or, my favorite, make a quest for what is already there for the finding! Make knowing and experiencing Jesus your quest!

Seeking “first” the kingdom of God means making the kingdom of God the center of our continual, daily priorities. It means placing top priority on identifying and involving ourselves in what God is doing. It means seeking him, and it means people.

Jesus sums up this section with a different attitude.

³⁴ “Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”

All the worry in the world today can do nothing about the cares and problems of tomorrow.

Sequence Again

Now let’s revisit the importance of the sequence of thought Jesus is unfolding in the context of the primary themes of inside-out righteousness and how we treat others in our relationships, or “heart” and “people”.

Jesus has moved from misguided concerns over reputation and public exhibitions of supposed righteousness to treasuring things that break down or can be stolen. Pursuing these treasures inevitably leads to worry and anxiety about things that God provides. Whether he provides in abundance or just enough from our point of view, he knows what we need, and we can trust him.

In the midst of these thoughts was the critical idea of light or darkness within our hearts based on a good eye or a bad eye, or a trust that God and the world he created is good or that the brokenness of the world has taken over everything. Did the story start in Genesis 1 with God's good creation or in Genesis 3 with the fall of humanity into sin?

Jesus is calling us back to a good eye, a Genesis 1 world view, and this good eye leads to generosity and hospitality and love. Generosity is how we lay up treasures in heaven. We will find all this so much easier, of course, once we have been freed from our old dependency upon the opinions of others and upon the "treasure" of material goods.

What keeps us from being more generous? A world view of scarcity, that we won't be enough. A bad eye sees the world as a scary place where we must guard all that we have with everything that is in us because there is nowhere else to turn.

But you can't join with God when you are worrying.

Worry comes from trusting in the wrong things – things that will inevitably let us down. Worry consumes life as does bitterness from broken relationships, but Jesus calls us to a heart attitude of trust. This, in turn, opens the door for us to lay aside worry and instead care about other people and pursue reconciliation when necessary. This all comes back to the heart and to people, Jesus' two key themes.

Now for one more well-known passage related to anxiety and its antidote:

Philippians 4:4-9

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. ⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Rejoice in who you are in Christ. Remember what he has done for you with gratitude. It then becomes easier and more natural to turn to him with our cares and worries. The Holy Spirit then fills us in return with peace from which more rejoicing can come.

Finally, remember that the war for the heart begins in the battle for the mind.

⁸ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

Questions

What are you worried about? Why?

Where is God?

How full is your pantry and your closet?

What do you seek? What does it mean to seek? For clues to the first question, think honestly about how you spend your time and your money.

Lesson 10 – Judging / Condemnation (Matthew 7:1-6)

Jesus now shifts from warning his disciples about their inward concerns regarding reputation and wealth and worry to specific relational practices and underlying attitudes that isolate us from people and from the goodness God desires for us in community. Keep in mind the dual themes of heart and people in the context of the nature of discipleship and life in the kingdom of God.

Judging Others

¹ “Judge not, that you be not judged. ² For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. ³ Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? ⁴ Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.”

Judging is a completely natural part of our human darkness. We have great confidence in the power of condemnation to straighten others out, for their own good of course. Yet what is really happening is that we are objectivizing and relegating them to exclusion. We diminish our community in the process. The goal must always be restoration versus condemnation.

Note the reference to the eye again with all this talk of specks and planks. Jesus is still talking about perspective and worry and generosity. We are still in a continuum of teaching.

Being judgmental is a big no-no in our society, but our society would quickly become destitute without some concepts of judgment of which there are three.

First, there is civil judgment. This is judgment rendered in a court. The judge does his job, as he must, for society to remain civil.

The second concept of judgment is discernment, or the determination that something is good or bad, light or darkness.

1 Corinthians 2:14-15

¹⁴ The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

¹⁵ The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one.

We are to exercise discernment in our dealings with others. A rabbinical quote states that, “In the beginning, God separated light from darkness, and that is forever our task as well.”

The third concept is value judgment, and this is what Jesus is driving at. It is judgment that sets the value of a person. This is crossing the line to something we are not allowed to do. Only God can assess a person's value. We must stay out of God's shoes.

“When disciples have developed this critical, condemning attitude as a pattern of life, they have forced love out of their relationships with others.” (Wilkins)

What is the opposite of judgement? Forgiveness. Now we are back to the Lord’s prayer and God’s invitation to join him in elevating others versus tearing them down.

Why do we pass value judgments? Why don’t we forgive other people? One, we seek to justify ourselves. Two, because we are afraid that they will not be judged properly, that they will get away with whatever perceived wrong they have done. We are *worried* that they will not get what they deserve, that God will not be fair.

Condemnation and Contempt

Casting judgment in the sense of assigning diminished value, which is what Jesus is addressing, is the act of condemnation. This is what all the talk of planks and specks is about. The sad reality is that condemnation runs deep in our consciousness and our subconsciousness.

“Of course, more than half the battle with condemnation is won once we have given up anger and contempt. Condemnation always involves some degree of self-righteousness and of distancing ourselves from the one we are condemning. And self-righteousness always involves an element of comparison and condemnation. ... There seems to be something righteous about condemnation.” (Willard)

Condemnation is a ready means of setting yourself above someone and hurting them in the process, and anger desires to hurt and put that someone in their place. And, of course, condemnation produces anger in the one condemned, and around and around it goes.

Clearly, then, if we are to come to terms with condemnation we must deal with anger and contempt, and if we have dealt with anger and contempt there will be little condemnation left to be dealt with.

We can also turn condemnation inward. In self-condemnation we are devaluing ourselves which is just as wrong as diminishing the value of others. It leads to shame. The difference between shame and conviction is that shame is an exercise of self and leads to a negative evaluation of our worthwhile conviction is the voice of God seeking to compel us to change from destructive behavior to that which is good. In conviction, our worth or value is never in question. We remain wholly loved by God.

Reciprocal Judgment

Verse 2 says judge not lest you be judged, and the measure you use will be used against you, so to speak. I have always thought this was God judging me by the measure I have judged others, but this does not fit the context. The context is people and relationships and how we treat others.

Therefore, this is not about us and God. Jesus is saying that others will respond to your judgment of them with judgment of their own directed back at you.

This plays out acutely in the family setting where condemnation is particularly harmful. Parents are dealing with teenagers who will bite back which can quickly escalate and

ramp up the spin cycle mentioned earlier. Or, parents are dealing with children who do not understand intellectually what is happening to them, but they feel the condemnation all the same. Because they are unable to respond in kind, they may turn the hurt inward resulting in a variety of maladies such as perfectionism, procrastination, rejection of authority, or worse.

Thus, condemnation as a strategy for correcting or “helping” others will almost always fail. It is extremely rare that anyone who is condemned will respond by changing in the desired way. They will instead react in their own self-interests. Condemnation on a societal level is referred to today as identity politics where grievances and counter-grievances flow freely. The result is the bath of contempt we see every day.

Remove the Plank

But Jesus again shows us a better way. Lay aside judgment and condemnation and look to yourselves first. Remove the plank from your eye. Afterwards, you will be able to genuinely help others take the speck, the thing that is blocking God’s goodness, from their eye.

But what is the plank? Is it fixing some problem with ourselves so that we can more effectively condemn someone else? No. The plank is the self-righteous condemnation itself. Jesus knows that the mere fact that we are condemning someone shows our heart does not have the outward-looking concern for others he has been talking about.

The key is to discern and offer guidance in a way that builds up. This requires humility and a non-presumptuous spirit, putting ourselves in their shoes and feeling the weight they are feeling. If you do this, you will fulfill Christ’s teaching. A level of mutual trust must also be in place. Otherwise, the person may not understand our positive intent and react with defensiveness. We must be ready to receive correction with humility as well and not with defensiveness.

It is hard to image a world without condemnation today. However, ...

[Romans 8:1](#)

[There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.](#)

Dogs and Pigs and Pearls

Now we come to a verse that is commonly misunderstood and misapplied. This statement flows directly from the idea that those who are unable to understand our good intentions, for whatever, reason, may react with defensiveness or worse.

⁶ “Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.”

“Dogs” and “pigs” were normal and familiar figures of speech used by Jews in reference to gentiles. It was not nice, but it was not taken as deeply derogatory as we think of it today. Pork was one of the biggest exports from the Decapolis, so the inference was apt if not polite.

Jesus is saying don't throw your pearls before gentiles, but what were the pearls? Pearls are a string of teachings in the rabbinical tradition. Stringing pearls is putting together a sequence of connected teachings or wisdom such as our SM.

Now consider, how will gentiles steeped in paganism receive a string of rabbinical, Jewish, monotheistic pearls, or teachings on how they should believe and behave? The pigs will not enjoy the pearls thrown at them and will react accordingly. Pigs don't know what to do with pearls.

Today, we who speak for God cannot take up and throw our morality before people who have not yet agreed to follow it. They have not signed up to follow Jesus, so we cannot expect them to embrace our perspective.

This is not a question of witnessing for Jesus. We are to be a witness. We are to let the world see our good deeds, and we are to speak the Gospel, but not with an attitude of spiritual superiority or just telling them where they are wrong.

It is how we approach people or our tone. Our countenance must show that we are for them and not against them or over them. "I have the pearls – you don't." The question here is not the worthiness of the pigs. Rather, *it is about us and our helpfulness.*

The point is not the waste of the "pearl". This has nothing to do with being shrewd or careful. These are the common misunderstandings today. The point of "don't cast your pearls before pigs" is that we not approach them in a way that is unhelpful or disrespectful. We must discern and avoid pushing the things of God upon others whether they want or are ready for them or not.

As always, this is about our heart attitudes towards people, having a generous spirit, the treatment of people with grace, demonstrating mercy and forgiveness and love.

To sum up, Jesus is teaching that what matters in our approach to people is not just what we do, but how we do it. It is certain that a judgmental or superior attitude or condemnation will never help us help them.

Questions

What are the three concepts of judgment? Which are inappropriate for us to exercise on a personal level? Which is offensive? Which is vital for us to exercise?

What is the plank? Just how big is the plank in your eye?

How do you see condemnation wielded in society today? How about within your small circle of society? How about by you?

What is the better way?

Are the pigs all that bad? (No) Who are the pigs in your life that you need to approach with boldness, gentleness, and respect?

Lesson 11 – Ask / The Golden Rule (Matthew 7:7-12)

Where We've Been

The last lesson ended with pigs and pearls, but unlike most interpretations I have ever heard, it was not about avoiding giving things to people who don't deserve them. Rather, it was about us and our tendency to try to fix people instead of helping them.

This lesson brings us to another teaching that I believe has been commonly misunderstood. But first, let's briefly review sequence yet again.

The kingdom is available to all. Life in this kingdom is rooted in fulfilling the law, the course of righteousness, not the source. Those who follow this course will be used by God to put the world back together. Thus, we need to understand what God intended the law to actually mean from the beginning. When we do so, our innermost heart will be transformed from angry to reconciling, from using people to serving people, from self-serving to others-minded, from manipulating to conveying dignity, from retaliation to trusting God for outcomes, and from normal hatred to abnormal love. With this transformation in heart towards others, we can then check our internal motivations. We can lay aside undo concern and worry over reputation, material wealth, and even daily sustenance, and instead become generous. This all feeds into our inter-personal relationships where we must resist and flip the compulsion to judge other's worth, to condemn, to fix, and to demand from others (this lesson) to see worth, help, and ask.

Matthew 7:1-12 are typically split up into verses 1-5, verse 6, verses 7-11, and verse 12. These are then each taken in isolation and appear to be just a few striking but unrelated points. But they are not. They are vitally connected points in the overall teaching and its progression. They illustrate the inner texture of kingdom life with family, friends, co-workers, and neighbors. They illustrate the kingdom attitude we are to adopt toward those closest to us. They exemplify agape, or self-giving, unconditional love culminating in the Golden Rule which is love itself.

All of this is about inside-out heart transformation manifested in how we treat and respond to other people.

Jesus devotes the end of his sermon following these points to urging us to discern. But that is for our final two lessons.

Asking

Jesus now turns from the negative emphasis on condemnation and imposition on verses 1-6 to a positive counter-emphasis.

⁷ "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. ⁹ Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? ¹¹ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"

We read this last statement about the Father giving good things to those who ask him and immediately assume the entire passage is about prayer and God answering prayer, for so we have been taught. I am now firmly convinced that we assume and have been taught incorrectly.

The reference to asking the Father is simply the third of three illustrations of the point Jesus is making about how we treat other people. We must remember the flow of the larger context if we are to cut through the proof-texting that is typically applied to this passage. Jesus' teaching throughout the SM, and this section in particular, is about how we interact with people. References to our interaction with God is by way of example in support of this larger point.

So, what is the larger point? Jesus not only hints in the first word but gives the entire answer: **"Ask."** Don't demand. Don't push. Don't impose. Just ask. Asking is the antithesis to confrontation. Asking is the opposite of demanding or imposing your will. Asking transfers power and control to the other person. It conveys dignity and respect.

"Asking is indeed the great law of the spiritual world through which things are accomplished in cooperation with God and yet in harmony with the freedom and worth of every individual." (Willard)

Asking, or requesting, opens the door for mutual respect and collaboration. It defuses or entirely avoids confrontation. Demanding separates. Asking unites. It is how we would want to be treated. We don't like being told what to do. We want to be asked.

A parallel passage with a similar misinterpretation is found in ...

James 4:1-3

¹ What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ² You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

Every bit of these verses is about interpersonal dynamics, not prayer. Likewise, ask, seek, knock in the SM is a show of respect and submission to the other person. The reality is that the request by itself is usually enough to bring about the desired result. Thus, the declarative statements such as **"it will be opened."**

Jesus gives three examples of the positive impact and results of asking, all in the context of the father-son relationship: bread versus stone, fish versus serpent, and good gifts from our Heavenly Father. Jesus says that this is so obvious in everyday life that even the evil fathers treat their sons this way when the son asks. So how much more lovingly will our good Heavenly Father respond to our requests. This is the picture of how abundant life works in the kingdom of God.

"Jesus' teaching about asking, about the request, takes us into the deepest nature of our life together in the kingdom of God as it is now present on earth." (Willard)

Some Caveats

One caution is to not turn this into another rule where we never tell our children or those under our supervision at work what to do. Directives are right and good when done from humility and for mutual benefit. (We live in a gray world. Very little is black and white.)

Another caution is to not use request as a means of manipulation. There is such a thing as a leading question that actually pushes the person asked in a selfish direction. There is power in a request. Have you ever gone out of your way to avoid being asked for something? It is fair to expect a response when asking but ask with an open hand that leaves the dignity of choosing how to respond in the hands of the person asked. And, when asked, return the dignity given with a response.

What About Prayer?

While I am convinced that this passage is not about prayer, to say that this has nothing to do with prayer would be to overstate the point. This teaching sets prayer in a larger context. The context is about giving, not getting.

Prayer is request as well as loving interaction. Prayer is God's gift to us as the means to join with him in his kingdom activities. Through prayer, we ask. Through prayer, we exchange anxiety for peace. Through prayer, we remind ourselves of our place with God as his adopted child, forever secure in his love.

This takes us back to trusting the story, the goodness of God beginning with creation. Do you have a bad eye living from a posture of scarcity and worry and judgment? Or do you have a good eye living from a posture of trust and generosity from where you can ask of others and be OK if they say, "No"? Can you ask God to take care of something, whatever it is, and leave it to him to do what he knows is good? Give all back to him because he knows how to give good gifts and be ready to act as his hands and feet in being the answer to some of those prayers.

Just as we ask God and trust him, we are to approach people with request, assuming the best and not the worst, and leaving the results to God and that person. Wisdom is required. Again, this is not a simplistic rule or law. Our hearts and minds must be engaged at all times.

The Golden Rule

All of these thoughts related to interpersonal relationships culminate in ...

12 "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets."

Jesus came to "fulfill" the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 5:17) while his Golden Rule "sums up" the Law and the Prophets. This is the pinnacle of the sermon, the key directive, followed by some closing thoughts.

This is commonly called the "Golden Rule" because the Emperor Alexander Severus of Rome from 222-235 AD adopted it as his motto and reputedly had it written on his wall in gold.

The Golden Rule was a common theme in Judaism. Rabbinic literature attributes the saying to Hillel the Elder who is said to have had the negative equivalent as his motto: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Go and learn!”

Confucius (551–479 B.C.) also stated it negatively, “Do not do unto others what you would not want others to do unto you!”

Here then is another example of Jesus taking something that was commonly known to his hearers and applying it within his teaching on life in the kingdom of God. Recall that the center of the SM was the addition to the Lord’s Prayer that we participate in the divine action of forgiveness. Without forgiveness, the Golden Rule will be impossible to fulfill.

“So, with the culminating Golden Rule, Jesus articulates in one statement the essence of God’s will as revealed in the Old Testament and the essence of kingdom life for his disciples. ... But whereas other expressions of this saying in the ancient world indicate ethical aspiration, Jesus declares that the Golden Rule is the normative manifestation of the discipleship of his followers.” (Wilkins)

Questions

Do you prefer to be asked or to be told? Why?

Do you ask or tell? Why?

What is the parallel between asking of others and prayer? To what extent may we think of asking someone for something as a prayer to them (in a non-idolatrous or worshipful sense, of course)? Explore this parallel.

How do you see the Golden Rule highlighted as an ideal in society at large? How do you see it applied? How have you applied it?

Lesson 12 – Choose / Discernment (Matthew 7:13-23)

Bookends

Jesus reached the climax of his sermon in 7:12 with the Golden Rule which, he stated, “is the Law and the Prophets.” This provided the back bookend to

Matthew 5:17

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. “

With this climax reached, Jesus now concludes the discourse we call the SM with four pictures of contrast and division to point to the clear choice before us regarding entry into the community of the kingdom of God where the law as properly understood is fulfilled because people actually treat others the way they would like to be treated.

We will cover the first three pictures in this lesson and conclude next week with the final picture and a review of the SM as a whole.

Which Gate?

The first represents the division between the church and the world.

¹³ “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. ¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”

Just as in our considerations of reward and treasures in Matthew 6, we tend to think that Jesus is talking about eternal destinations here: Heaven or Hell. But eternity is not referenced. We simply project our broader theology onto this teaching with our emphasis on getting into heaven above all else. I am not saying anything about the reality of heaven and hell. I am simply saying that this text does not either.

We must recall again the context of the SM. It is about life now, reward now, what we treasure now, how we treat others now, the state of our heart now, our righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees now. Eternity and eternal life are not mentioned even once in the SM.

Jesus is emphasizing the choice of gates through which we enter on to a chosen way, or path, here and now. This is not a diversion to something else eternal, especially when the language has not changed in that direction. The word ‘eternity’ does not appear in the any of the Gospels (ESV version). The word ‘eternal’ does not appear in Matthew until 18:8.

Neither is the narrow gate about doctrinal correctness. Rather, the narrow gate is the choice of obedience. The wide gate is simply choosing to do whatever it is you want to do. We must choose between the two.

In *Finding Nemo*, Marlin and Dory had a choice: go through the narrow, dark, scary-looking channel or go up and over the rock formation in the wide, open ocean. They took the path that was easier only to find it full of danger and death amidst “the jellies”.

We naturally gravitate to the wide gate whether consciously or not, so if you want to walk in the way of the kingdom of God, you are going to have to do it with intention. You will not simply stumble your way there. You have to aim for it. It is narrow, and the path it leads to is hard. If we gaze at the path itself, we are sure to go astray, but if we behold Jesus before, step by step, we shall not go astray. Thus, the intention is manifested in keeping our eyes on Jesus and not on our performance. It is all unconscious.

In the light of the rest of the New Testament, no one is able to walk the narrow path without the enabling of the Spirit, but that awareness is not yet at play here and, in fact, should not be read into this. All in good time. But, when entering a path, the gate comes first. The gate has a name, and his name is Jesus. Let us then ask not which will you choose, but who will you choose?

The difficulty of the path harkens back to the Beatitudes and the blessing on you when you choose to live like the kingdom is truly available to all. Persecution is the stated result of that choice. The alternative, however, is ultimately a destroyed life.

As an aside, there is another reference to a gate that readily comes to mind.

Matthew 16:18

“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

Jesus made this statement standing in front of a physical location in Caesarea Philippi. There was spring there that flowed out of a cave which literally was called the Gates of Hell. Jesus was physically pointing to a tourist attraction. It was here that a festival to the god Pan was held which was a religious event of extreme debauchery and idolatry. Jesus was not referring to spiritual warfare or the like. He was referring to religious and lifestyle choices represented by a particular place. Those choices and the forces behind them are what will not prevail.

Which Tree?

In this second picture, Jesus admonishes his disciples to be fruit inspectors. This picture represents the division between good and bad within the church.

¹⁵ “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.”

Thrown into Hell fire? Again, we are quick to project ideas that are not there.

We are called to judge, to discern, whether a prophet, or one who proclaims the Word of God, is true or false. By extension, we are to discern whether we ourselves are true or false by our fruit as well. This is not about salvation. That is clarified later. This is about

the authenticity of our discipleship. It is about our belief being evidenced more accurately by our actions than our words – by our fruit.

Regarding teachers, or prophets, it is correct that one is false when one interprets incorrectly. In this respect, they are not Orthodox. However, Jesus is emphasizing Orthopraxy here. This is about living out the correct interpretation. When this is done, we can be confident that the teacher actually believes what he says. The fruit is in the actions, not the words.

We may couple this with the fruits of the Spirit found in Galatians 5:22. If you have a teacher who demonstrates the fruits of the Spirit, you have found good fruit. The source of the fruit must be a good tree, a good vine. This also harkens to John 15 and Jesus' teaching that he is the vine and we are the branches. Bad fruit, on the other hand, is the opposite of good fruit. It is lack of love, harshness, lack of self-control, etc.

Therefore, if one's Orthopraxy is off, they are a false teacher. A good teacher must have good fruit, not just good words. Their walk is one we want to emulate. If there is systemic impatience, fits of rage, lack of generosity, etc., that is a teacher we must not follow. A tree cannot refuse to bear fruit. The fruit will inevitably be born out. A bad or diseased tree simply cannot bear good fruit.

“All one has to do to identify those who would mislead us is watch what they do and pay little attention to what they say.” (Willard)

The basic fault of a false teacher is self-interest. There are at least three ways that self-interest manifests itself: the teacher may teach for gain, for prestige, and/or to transmit his or her own ideas and not God's truth.

Recalling the context of the SM, the Pharisees said and did the right things, but the heart was unclean. They were pushing the sinner out when they should have been inviting him/her in, making the kingdom available. They did not bear the fruit of the Spirit. Jesus could tell by their fruit.

Matthew 23:2-3

² “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, ³ so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice.”

Given our lack of perfection, there is still a word of grace that must also be applied. Those who teach and lead are rightly held to a higher standard but not a legalistic or impossible one.

Who's Will?

Jesus then immediately applies this teaching about fruit and practice to those who say the right thing by addressing him as “Lord” but whose hearts are still for themselves and not for God and others, even if their doing appears magnificent. Here, finally, is the division to be revealed on the last day.

²¹ “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name,

and do many mighty works in your name?’²³ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”

In Jewish thought, the “kingdom of heaven” is the kingdom of God here and now. So, again, this is not about salvation but discipleship. This is about doing from a Jesus-centered, Jesus-focused heart. Confession is not enough. Simply saying “Lord, Lord” is not a formula for anything. Even doing good is not enough. It’s doing good out of the goodness of a heart that is transformed and following Jesus as Lord.

The point in the previous picture, that bad fruit negates right teaching, is even more stark here with the declaration that many apparently good and powerful works are actually corrupt. Heed this warning. Just as teachings from a bad tree should not impress, neither should signs and wonders in and of themselves. Beware being awed more by miracles than by the person of Jesus himself. Such misplaced awe comes from being thrilled by earth-bound power and glory.

Aside from signs and wonders, it is possible for there to be great acts of self-sacrifice, Christian charity, even martyrdom, yet all without love. Such right actions are only a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal (1 Corinthians 13:1). It is much ado about nothing. Just as we cannot point to our confession, neither can we point to our deeds. We can only point to, and rely upon, the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf, and on this we may be ultimately confident (Hebrews 4:16, 1 John 5:13).

We are back to our righteousness versus that of the Pharisees. Theirs was external. True righteousness is inside-out. Thrilling works done only from external or selfish motives are rotten. Who’s will is exercised? Who’s glory is sought? Recall the earlier portions of the SM dealing with reputation. Jesus is first concerned with the internal heart, not the external words or works.

So, what is the word we eagerly await to hear on the last day? I have always longed to hear, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” But there are four words that I want to hear before those, whether the “well done” comes or not: “I have known you.”

“Here we are at last, here is the secret we have been waiting for since the Sermon on the Mount began. Here is the crucial question – has Jesus known us or not? ... There is nothing left for us to cling to, not even our confession or our obedience. There is only his word: ‘I have known you.’” (Bonhoeffer)

Discipleship is straining forward to know Jesus (Philippians 3:8,12-14). Eternal life is knowing God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent (John 17:3). The word for ‘know’ in those verses is the same as that used here in Matthew 7:23. Of course God knows us in that he formed us, but this word for knowing is far deeper than that. This is a relational, intimate knowing, the joining of souls. That is the goal of discipleship. To know and be known by Jesus. He is our focus. Pleasing and glorifying him is our desire. And this is all made possible only by the work and word of his grace.

Why These Pictures?

Recall the social context of the SM. Jesus taught in a highly religious culture with a well-established religious elite driven by external acts of righteousness. All in lower strata assumed they were right in their practices and teachings, their approach to God.

Now, after laying out the way of the kingdom, Jesus is pointing back these religious and cultural assumptions which he shocked by saying our righteousness must exceed that of the elite, the Pharisees.

We must choose a gate off the beaten path leading to a harder, less-traveled way.

We must not be fooled by teachers whose words seem right but whose actions betray an internal corruption.

We must beware crying out “Lord, Lord” while not doing the will of God which is obedience. Obedience is a loaded word. More on that next week.

Questions

What is eternal life? (John 17:3)

What part does discipleship play in eternal life?

What is your intention? How is that intention lived out? At what are you aiming?

When you call out, “Lord, Lord,” whose glory are you seeking?

Lesson 13 – Foundation / Obedience (Matthew 7:24-29)

After reaching the climax of the SM with the Golden Rule, Jesus concluded with a series of contrasting images to clearly lay out the choice regarding entry into the community of the kingdom of God. The last of these four is the contrast of choice by the foolish builder and the wise builder.

Which Location?

²⁴ “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

“Great was the fall of if” or “it fell with a great crash.” Not a cheery way to end a sermon, but then sermons should challenge first and uplift second.

First, this is not about construction. It is safe to assume that the same house would be built by both builders. This is about location. Does the builder construct the house on sand or on rock?

There are two kinds of sand. There is the sand of the seashore, or beach sand. This is, of course, what we westerners think of given our propensity for the beach. This is the sand we experience. But who builds a house on a beach? How long does a sandcastle ever last? And what do you find when you dig down in beach sand? Rock or water?

The second kind of sand is desert sand. There are the wind-swept dunes of the Sahara on which no one would ever build, and there is the sand at the bottom of wadis in the rocky desert common to the experience of the Jesus’ hearers. A wadi is a channel worn in rock that is dry except during periods of rainfall. When the rains come, the wadi floods very rapidly. The water leaves a sediment on the wadi floor, and this is the sand Jesus is referring to. You may build your house on this sand, and it may stand for a long time, maybe even years, but the flood will eventually come, and when it comes, it will be swift and violent. The house will crash and be swept away. Such is the life of one who does not seek to live out the interpretation of the law Jesus has laid out in the SM.

The alternative to building on the sand in the bottom of the wadi is to build one of the ledges of the cliff faces forming the sides of the wadi above the channel where the flood waters rush by. Building a house on such a place will be difficult but secure. Such a choice will require intention.

Jesus is saying, “If you’ll trust me, you’ll build on the cliff. If you don’t, it won’t work in the long run. Such a choice is easy but foolish because destruction is sure to come. Building on the cliff will take intention. It will bring persecution. It won’t be easy, but it will endure.”

This is about trusting the story, rising above your circumstances just as the house on the cliff is above the flood. It will be good. This message is unchanged from the very beginning. Jesus made the way and is the way for us to enter God's story, but the story itself has not changed.

The Authority of Jesus

With that Jesus concluded his discourse we call the SM.

²⁸ And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching,
²⁹ for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

Rabbinic authority was a formal matter, and one could only offer interpretation of the Scriptures after being given such authority. You must have two witnesses convey this authority upon you. Who were Jesus's two witnesses? John the Baptist, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," and God Himself, "this is my Son, in whom I am well-pleased."

The crowds wondered who this was who was teaching with such authority. They were amazed, yet this amazement did not necessarily translate into acceptance.

What about us? Are we just amazed, or have we accepted the narrow way begun building on the cliff? Will we choose to follow?

Obedience / Discipleship

One word that captures such building is 'obedience'. As I said in the last lesson, this is a loaded word. People typically fall into two traps regarding obedience.

The first trap is the idea that obedience is a negative thing. It carries a negative tone.

As Americans, we pride ourselves on individual liberty. No one tells us what to do, yet obedience implies submission to someone else. For me, I think of parent and child, of corporal discipline and stern words. I also think of a servant who must simply do what he is told. Thus, obedience is tied to fear of punishment or forced subservience.

Tying these ideas to Christian discipleship makes being a Christian quite the killjoy. Such obedience is dull or worse. It might spoil our plans or even ruin our life. We don't want to give up our "behavioral options" because we may want them when our natural desire, or what we want, comes into conflict with the narrow way (and our own good). We like to keep some things hidden just in case as though God can't see inside.

The second trap is the idea that obedience is external actions or works righteousness. This was the mistake of the Pharisees. Obedience is what one does by raw exertion of will and obligatory, excruciating effort in order to gain God's favor. Despite the strain, at least this allows us to retain control.

Each of these traps are false and deceptive thinking.

In contrast to the negative view of obedience, what is the 'good eye' view? Based on the SM, obedience would seem to mean living a life free of anger, hatred, anxiety, and fear. It is a life filled with peace, love, and contentment, lack of concern of what others think, confident in who we have been made to be in Christ. Obedience is having the strength

and understanding that enables you to genuinely and naturally bless those who curse you while trusting God for the outcomes.

John 10:10

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

In a word, obedience is abundance. This is abundance of quality, not quantity.

Regarding the second trap, obedience is not required to gain God's favor. We obey because God's favor was freely offered, and we chose to accept. Obedience is not the works. Obedience is the choices from which the works follow. Just like everything else in the SM, obedience is inside-out. It starts not with the hands, but with a renewed mind and transformed heart.

We follow Jesus' example.

Hebrews 5:7-9

⁷ In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. ⁸ Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. ⁹ And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.

There is a lot underlying this regarding the humanity and divinity of Jesus, but the point for now is that his obedience opened the path of salvation for us all! As for you ...

Ephesians 2:1-2a,4-5a, 8-10

¹ And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked. ...
⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ. ...
⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

We were spiritually dead, and the dead cannot raise themselves. The transformation of our hearts starts with the work of God in raising us from death to life by his grace because of his love and favor. Next, we choose. This is the first step of obedience. Works, the doing of the word, the doing of the law as Jesus taught in the SM, can only follow from that. The law, the doing, is the course of righteousness, not the source. Thus, obedience flows from a resurrected life. Such obedience then becomes easy and natural. We are to be doers of the word and not hearers only (James 1:22), but the order, or the sequence, is everything.

But what about our constant failure? What about when it doesn't feel easy or come naturally? Sometimes one wants to just give up. When faced with internal accusation and the reality of our imperfection, we must persevere and remember that ...

Proverbs 24:16a

The righteous falls seven times and rises again.

Romans 14:4b

It is before his own master that (a servant) stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

Recall Leviticus 19:1-2 quoted in Matthew 5:48.

¹ And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ² “Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.”

Holy means to be set apart. We are not called or expected to be perfect, but we are called and expected to be different from the world and to show that our God is different. That is what Jesus is calling us to choose to be. That is Christian discipleship. It requires intention and is made possible by the grace and God and the work of the Holy Spirit given to us. It is “restful dissatisfaction” – resting in Jesus while straining to know him more.

Romans is bookended in 1:5 and 16:26 with the phrase “obedience of faith”. Both verses also refer to the nations to whom the Gospel is directed. Faith modulates into both obedience and abundance or, in a word, discipleship. This is all too rare in our culture of consumer Christianity but let us all be exceptions to the modern rule.

Matthew 28:18-20

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Questions

Where are you building? Is it easy or hard?

Are you amazed at Jesus’s teaching and authority? Is there more to your response?

How would you define obedience?

How is your obedience being manifested?

Succinct Review

The kingdom is available to all. Life in this kingdom is rooted in fulfilling the law, and those who do so will be used by their King to put the world back together as they follow Him. Thus, we need to understand what God intended the law to actually mean from the beginning. When we do so, our innermost heart will be transformed from angry to reconciling, from using people to serving people, from self-serving to others-minded, from manipulating to conveying dignity, from retaliation to trusting God for outcomes, and from normal hatred to abnormal love. With this transformation in heart towards others, we can then check our internal motivations. We can lay aside undo concern and worry over reputation, material wealth, and even daily sustenance, and instead become generous in our inter-personal relationships. We can escape our compulsion to judge other's worth, to condemn, to fix, and to demand from others. Instead, we are to check ourselves first, to seek to help while meeting others where they are, and to simply ask. In a phrase, we are to treat others as we wish to be treated. Finally, with all of this in mind, there is a choice to be made between popular, convenient, easy, but foolish options, and a difficult, unpopular, but wise option. Choose wisely. All of this is about inside-out heart transformation manifested in how we treat and respond to other people.

Resources

The resources drawn from are primarily as follows:

- All Scriptures quoted from the English Standard Version (ESV) translation
- *The Divine Conspiracy* by Dallas Willard
- *The NIV Application Commentary – Matthew* by Michael J. Wilkins
- The *BEMA Discipleship* podcast, Session 3, Episodes 93-99
- *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

What People are Saying about the Sermon on the Mount

Peter the Disciple

“That’s my rabbi!”

Saint Augustine

“Anyone who piously and earnestly ponders the Sermon on the Mount, as we read in the Gospel according to Mathew, I believe he will find therein ... the perfect standard of the Christian Life.”

Martin Luther

Regarding the fifth chapter of Matthew (the first of three chapters containing the Sermon on the Mount):

“Dear brother, if you please, and have nothing better, let this my preaching serve you, in the first place, against our squires, the jurists and sophists, I mean especially the canonists, whom they themselves indeed call asses, and such they really are, so that you may keep the teaching of Christ for yourself pure in this place of Matthew, instead of their ass’s cunning and devil’s dung.

“In the second place also against the new jurists and sophists, namely, the factious spirits and Anabaptists, who in their crazy fashion are making new trouble out of this fifth chapter. And just as the others go too much to the left in holding nothing at all of this teaching of Christ, but have condemned and obliterated it, so do these lean too much to the right, and teach that one should have nothing of his own, should not swear, should not act as ruler or judge, should not protect or defend, should forsake wife and child, and much of such miserable stuff.”

Jeff Good, pastor of CCC

“It’s the bomb. Freaking awesome!”

About the Author



Perry Seip has been a follower of Jesus since 1980. He has attended Christ Communication Church in Ashburn, VA, since 1997. He is blissfully married with six children. In his spare time, he works as an electrical engineer, plays trombone in rock and salsa bands, plays Frisbee golf, and digs out stumps.