

connect 360

BIBLE STUDY GUIDE

Kingdom Power

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

A STUDY OF MATTHEW 5–7

K. Randel Everett



**GC2
PRESS**

Dallas, Texas

Kingdom Power: The Sermon on the Mount
Connect 360 Bible Study Guide

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How to Make the Best Use of This Issue

Whether you're the teacher or a student—

1. Start early in the week before your class meets.
2. Overview the study. Review the table of contents and read the study introduction. Try to see how each lesson relates to the overall study.
3. Use your Bible to read and consider prayerfully the Scripture passages for the lesson. (You'll see that each writer has chosen a favorite translation for the lessons in this issue. You're free to use the Bible translation you prefer and compare it with the translation chosen for that unit, of course.)
4. After reading all the Scripture passages in your Bible, then read the writer's comments. The comments are intended to be an aid to your study of the Bible.
5. Read the small articles—"sidebars"—in each lesson. They are intended to provide additional, enrichment information and inspiration and to encourage thought and application.
6. Try to answer for yourself the questions included in each lesson. They're intended to encourage further thought and application, and they can also be used in the class session itself.

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- Make and post a chart that indicates the date each lesson will be studied.
 - If all your class has e-mail, send them an e-mail with the dates the lessons will be studied.
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Writer for this *Study Guide*

Randel Everett wrote lessons one through thirteen plus the optional Christmas lesson. Dr. Everett spent four decades pastoring churches in Florida, Virginia, Arkansas, and Texas. He founded the John Leland Center for Theological Studies in Falls Church, Virginia, and has also served as the Executive Director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Randel is currently the founder and President of 21Wilberforce based in Washington D.C. 21Wilberforce focuses attention on religious persecution abroad and the enduring importance of religious liberty in the United States. Throughout his career, Randel has traveled to over forty countries and witnessed religious persecution firsthand. Randel and his wife Sheila live in Waco, Texas and have two adult children and four grandchildren.

Introducing

Kingdom Power *The Sermon on the Mount*

A STUDY OF MATTHEW 5–7

The Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon on the Mount appears early in Matthew's gospel. Jesus spoke to the disciples sitting near Him as well as the crowd that surrounded Him. At the time of the Sermon, Matthew was possibly standing among the crowd since the account of His calling as a disciple doesn't come until Matthew 9:9. Decades later, when the Holy Spirit moved Matthew to write the gospel, he was one of the Christ followers who was already being restricted and possibly persecuted for his faith. He may have understood Jesus' profound teachings with greater clarity than when he first heard them.

I have had the privilege to work with folks who are suffering under religious persecution for several years. When I hear them teach the Scriptures, I listen to their insights into the Bible from a perspective far different from mine. I have struggled with the Sermon on the Mount because it did not fit

well within my western worldview. Yet the Bible makes more sense to sufferers because much of it was written by persecuted folks for persecuted folks. For them, the Beatitudes are a promise and a word of hope, a promise of what can be and a hope of what will be if we live life on Jesus' terms.

Kingdom Power Today

Jesus taught us to pray, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." In the middle of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), Jesus is speaking of Kingdom citizens living empowered lives.

When God gave the Law to Israel, they responded that they heard what God was saying and were determined to obey (Deuteronomy 5:27). God responded, "Oh that they had such a heart in them" (Deuteronomy 5:29). The life Jesus described is one that requires a new nature, a law of the heart, one that exceeds even the morality of rule keeping of the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 5:20).

The Sermon on the Mount is not an inspirational speech motivating us to be the best that we can be, a descriptive narrative for exceptional times or leaders, nor a blueprint for moral action. Jesus told of a life of grace that requires transformational power for those being re-created into Kingdom citizens reflecting the light of Christ's righteousness to a world living in darkness.

Dr. Randel Everett

Kingdom Power
The Sermon on the Mount
A Study of Matthew 5–7

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Lesson 13	Surviving the Storms	Matthew 7:24–29
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NOTES

- ¹ Listing a book does not imply full agreement by the writer or GC2 Press with all its comments.

Kingdom Power

The Sermon on the Mount

A Study of Matthew 5–7

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lesson 1

The Be-Attitudes

MAIN IDEA

Jesus brings blessings to His followers even in the difficult seasons of life.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

When have I experienced joy in the midst of my suffering?

STUDY AIM

We should seek to experience the true fulfillment in Christ even in life's most difficult challenges.

QUICK READ

In each verse there is a blessing and an attitude. The blessings flow from the attitudes themselves. Jesus described a life that is transformed by the fruit of the Spirit.

Introduction

John Stuart Mill was an English philosopher of the 19th century who said that the goal of society was to provide the greatest pleasure for the greatest number of its citizens. In the western world, it seems we have obviously adopted that reasoning in the 21st century with the cultural goal of life being the pursuit of pleasure. How is that working? Has it brought contentment? The endless quest for wealth, power, sexual fulfilment, pleasure, and recognition has produced anger, greed, malice, and hostility as attested in daily news media headlines and television programming.

Jesus spoke to folks who have the same nature as we do; yet He taught with an authority and clarity that distinguished Him from others. The Sermon on the Mount appears early in Matthew's gospel. Jesus spoke to the disciples sitting near Him as well as the crowd that surrounded Him. At the time of the Sermon, Matthew was possibly standing among the crowd since the account of his calling as a disciple doesn't come until Matthew 9:9. Decades later, when the Holy Spirit moved Matthew to write the gospel, he was one of the Christ followers who was already being restricted and possibly persecuted for his faith. He may have understood Jesus' profound teachings with greater clarity than when he first heard them.

I have had the privilege to work with folks who are suffering under religious persecution for several years. When I hear them teach the Scriptures, I listen to their insights into the Bible from a perspective far different from mine. I have struggled with the Sermon on the Mount because it did not fit well within my west-

ern worldview. I want to call the Beatitudes, “Lucky are the Unlucky,” in the words of Philip Yancey.¹ Yet the Bible makes more sense to sufferers because much of it was written *by* persecuted folks *for* persecuted folks. For them, the Beatitudes are a promise and a word of hope, a promise of what can be and a hope of what will be if we live life on Jesus’ terms.

Matthew 5:1–12

¹ When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. ² He opened His mouth and began to teach them, saying, 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 gentle, 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 have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Kingdom Citizens

The life and teachings of Jesus are either dangerous or transforming, certainly not boring religious dogma. People from all walks of life listened to Him teach for days without eating. His message challenged public practices; “love your enemies” (Matthew 5:44), “give to him who asks of you” (5:42). Jesus turned away the rich young ruler but accepted the thief on the cross. He forgave the woman caught in adultery yet was critical of the scribes and Pharisees who diligently attempted to keep the Law. Notorious sinners swarmed to hear Him teach yet religious leaders attempted to silence Him. Rather than protecting the status quo and seeking the favor of the powerful, He challenged injustice and the hypocrisy of those whose interests were egotistical.

Eberhard Arnold witnessed firsthand the atrocities of World War I. He became discontent with churches that supported oppression and he longed for a community that attempted to live by the teachings of Jesus. He left the established church because he believed it to be complicit in the atrocities of the war and began the Bruderhof community in 1920. He believed Jesus’ way was practical. “If you have two coats, give one to him who has none; give food to the hungry, and do not turn away your neighbor when he needs to borrow from you.”² He wrote, “Jesus concerned himself not only with souls, but also with bodies. He made the blind to see, the lame to walk, and the deaf to hear.”³ Even though Arnold wished to create a brotherhood of justice and righteousness in the midst of a world torn by division and injustice, his radical life and teachings led him to experience persecution allowing him to share in the sufferings of Jesus.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian executed by the Nazi's just days before the end of World War II, saw the dynamic of the gospel when he encountered the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem on his visit to America. He heard Jesus preached in a way he had never heard before by a congregation engaged in the struggle for justice while they celebrated with a vibrant worship filled with the hope of the world to come.

Matthew

Matthew was a Jewish tax collector who often quoted from the Old Testament proving to his Jewish readers that Jesus is the Messiah. The gospel makes frequent references to the kingdom of Heaven. Jesus tells us that His kingdom is both now and future. He taught us to pray, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (6:10). His concern for His followers embraces both for this life and the life to come.

"No other religious teaching in the history of humanity has attracted as much attention as the Sermon on the Mount. Philosophers and political leaders like Mohandas Gandhi and others who have refused to believe in Jesus as the Christ, the Lord and Savior, have, nevertheless, admired and tried to follow his teachings in the Sermon. It has received such titles as the Christian Magna Charta, the Christian Manifesto, the Design for Life, or simply Ethics for Christian Living."⁴

Reading the Beatitudes

When I visited Archbishop Ben and Gloria Kwashi from Jos, Nigeria, and learned of their struggles, battles, and life-threatening persecution, I was reminded by their lifestyles that the Beatitudes are written in the present tense. They actually live a “blessed” life in the midst of struggles and opposition. Being citizens of the kingdom, they recognize their responsibility to orphans living on the streets of Northern Nigeria and legally adopted over 75 children while providing shelter and education for hundreds of others. As the Anglican archbishop, Kwashi carried the burden of the responsibilities of his many churches and parishioners; yet exuded joy and hope in the presence of Christ in this life and the glory that is yet to come.

Philip Yancey reminds us that “Jesus could make such promises with authority, for He had come to establish God’s kingdom that would rule forever.”⁵ When Jesus looked out at the multitudes, He taught the disciples that the ones who are blessed are actually those in need rather than the ones who were content, because the needy may be desperate enough to turn to Jesus when they had no other place to turn.

Be-Attitudes (5:3–12)

I have been asked if I have ever received the “second blessing,” perhaps speaking of blessing as a special anointing. Typically, this refers to an outpouring of the Holy Spirit in a gathering of Christians, attested by an outward expression of spiritual gifts. While I do not want to minimize what may have been a meaning-

ful experience for my questioners, however, when Jesus speaks of blessing, the context is quite different, typically accompanied by hardship and suffering. Who are the blessed?

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

Faithful, Even Unto Death!

"Death for God's people, is not the dreaded specter of the grim reaper who comes to cut us down with his sinister scythe. This was brought home to me in a most wonderful way during the death of my first wife. We had both known for many weeks that the time of her 'call to go home' was at hand. We were fully aware of all the remarkable revelations given to men by our Father as to what life would be like in His realm prepared for His people. So, the hour of her departure approached, we sat side by side, hand in hand, quietly resting in the presence of Christ. His assurances to us that all was well enfolded us both in a spirit of peace and quiet acceptance that this was His arrangement.

Softly, in syllables barely audible she turned to me and breathed her last words: 'Faithful, even unto death!' Then in that instant her spirit was gone.

It was during those days of dark loneliness, in the shadow of my sorrow, that Christ became to me more real, more living, more present than ever before. He, and He alone, comforted my soul beyond my ability to tell."⁶

Jesus began with the promise of the kingdom of heaven to those who are poor in spirit. In Luke's account of the Beatitudes, (Luke 6:20), he wrote, "Blessed *are* you *who* are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." Most of us have difficulty comprehending true poverty. However, many of those in the crowd listening to Jesus speak understood the challenge of finding daily food. Millions around the world and many in our own country suffer hunger and homelessness and cry out in desperation for the basic necessities of life.

Following Jesus is more than desiring an occasional moment of inspiration or a Sunday morning trip to church. Not even the legalistic Pharisees who kept the whole law were righteous enough to enter the kingdom of Heaven on their own. Followers of Christ must recognize the poverty of their own righteousness and turn desperately to God's amazing grace. To these Jesus promises the kingdom of Heaven.

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

Almost nothing in life compares to the grief of the death of a loved one. Physical death is irreversible, yet Jesus reversed death by raising Lazarus, Jairus' daughter, and by His own resurrection. Our faith is challenged in those moments when we long to know our faith is true. Read the story of Philip Keller's experience with the death of his wife (Faithful, Even Unto Death! Page 20).

- Blessed are the gentle for they shall inherit the earth (5:5).

In our culture the typical picture of the one who inherits the earth is the powerful, the warrior, or the shrewd. Yet Jesus said it is the gentle who shall inherit the earth. This Beatitude is a

restatement of Psalm 37:11, “The humble will inherit the land.” In Numbers 12:3, Moses is described as the most humble man on earth. Gentleness, meekness, or humility can be confused with weakness, yet, with God’s help, Moses was powerful enough to stand up to the Pharaoh, and wise enough to lead a nation of undisciplined, complaining, and ungrateful people to the brink of the promised land. The gentle are those who submit themselves to the will of God.

- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied (5:6).

Righteousness is a word we may seldom use. A definition of righteousness is acting in accord with moral law. However, Jesus summarized true righteousness by summarizing the Law and the prophets with the simple expression, “In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you” (Matthew 7:12). When driven by God’s transformational grace, we long for a compelling desire to love others. Hunger is satisfied when one is filled with that for which he was hungry. One can be hungry for food, power, sexual fulfillment, and recognition; yet unable to reach a place where true contentment is found. Later in the Sermon (6:33), Jesus promises, “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” In Psalm 37:4, King David wrote, “Delight yourself in the Lord; and He will give you the desires of your heart.”

- Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy (5:7).

Justice is getting what is deserved. Grace is getting what is undeserved. Mercy is not getting what is deserved. Some years ago, during a church service in southern Ethiopia, a communi-

ty mob attacked a local church, which is located in a very rural area. A mob was formed and in the middle of the worship service launched an attack on the worshipers. The mob burst in, machetes were raised, and the joy of worship was replaced with the wails of lament. One of the choir members was killed and many others received permanent damage from the blunt trauma of the blade.

One of the most traumatic cases was that of a young boy who lost his hand in the attack. Still a child, he would face the reality of his life with only one hand. His father was present during the attack and during the interview, the father was asked, “If you could see your attackers today, how would you respond to them?” He replied: “I have not seen them but... I love them... [The Lord] has brought so many good things into our lives. If I saw them, I would ask them to rejoice and know my Lord.”

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

Philip Yancey refers to the struggles of the Catholic writer François Mauriac concerning his battle with lust. He dismissed most of the arguments in favor of sexual purity that he had been taught in his Catholic upbringing. He was taught marriage will cure lust, but it did not. He was taught with self-discipline you can master lust. “Yet he found sexual desire is like a tidal wave powerful enough to bear away all the best intentions. In the end, he could find only one reason to be pure, and that is what Jesus presented in the Beatitudes: ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.’ Impurity separates us from God. Purity is the condition for a higher love—for a possession superior to all possessions: that of God. Yes, this is what is at stake, and nothing less.”⁷

- Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God (5:9).

“Richness in God and poverty in oneself, becoming one with God and insatiable hunger for Him, undivided resolve of the heart and weakness of the soul, the justice of God’s love and the suffering of injustice—these always belong together.”⁸ A peacemaker is not one who just tries to get along with everyone. Jesus challenged injustices, especially those perpetrated by leaders who subjugated others while attempting to hold on to their own authority. Just as a child resembles a parent, when a Christ follower stands up for righteousness, that follower will be called a child of God.

- Blessed are the persecuted...for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (5:10–12).

Men, women, and even children have suffered for Christ’s sake in every generation. Even today there are millions around the world who are suffering for no other reason than the fact they are followers of Jesus. Some face economic pressures or social alienation, while many others are beaten, thrown into prison, and even executed. Jesus reminds us that the persecuted join a host of others who have suffered for their faith and promises the rewards outweigh the anguish; theirs is the kingdom of Heaven. At times those suffering for their faith describe situations similar to the Hebrew boys who were thrown into the fire when God’s presence was felt to be with them (Daniel 3). Yet at other times the persecuted share the cry of Jesus on the cross and ask if God has forsaken them. Yet whether or not they are aware of God’s

presence, they cling to the promise, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Implications and Actions

The Jesus we encounter in Matthew 5–7 may appear different from the Jesus we often hear preached. He is clearly more than the baby Jesus we adore in the manger, or the King who promises wealth and prosperity. Jesus speaks to all who seek to follow Him and not just to a special class of clergy, or folks living in past or future dispensations. His words are beyond a call to justice or lofty impossible ethical standards. Jesus described a grace that transforms followers into kingdom citizens who serve Him in this age and in the age to come.

Each day this week include praying through the Beatitudes as part of your quiet time asking God to align your priorities with His.

Questions

1. How do you think the crowd, the religious leaders, and the disciples responded to these radical teachings of Jesus?

2. How do the Beatitudes challenge our priorities and even our doctrines?

3. How can we participate in Jesus' blessings to the persecuted?

4. When have you experienced the comfort of God in a time of personal mourning?

ENDNOTES

¹ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 103.

² Eberhard Arnold, *Salt and Light*, (Rifton, NY: The Plough Publishing House, 1967), xiv.

³ Arnold, xvi.

⁴ David S. Dockery & David E. Garland, *Seeking the Kingdom*, (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1992), 1.

⁵ Yancey, 110.

⁶ W. Philip Keller, *Salt for Society*, (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1981), 32–33.

⁷ Yancey, 119.

⁸ Arnold, 26.

lesson 2

Isolation or Impact?

MAIN IDEA

Jesus produces a spirit within His followers that is as distinctive as salt is to a diet and light is to darkness.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

When have I been light in the midst of a dark situation?

STUDY AIM

We are called to risk standing out as agents of righteousness even when we know our actions will bring opposition.

QUICK READ

Jesus empowers His followers to be salt and light in the world by producing good works in them that will bring glory to God.

Introduction

How can the church, or even more specifically the church where we serve, have a transformative impact on the world? When Jesus spoke to the disciples and the multitude sitting and standing before Him, He saw a crowd of folks who were unlikely to overturn the evils of their society. They were not conspicuous because of their abilities or influence. They were predominantly Galileans from humble circumstances, who were the brunt of jokes by the educated folks from Judea; and were primarily fishermen, merchants, and other disrespected vocations.

Yet Jesus knew these were precisely the kind of folks He would use to change the world.

Do you ever look around your neighborhood, school, or place where you work and wonder how you can share the hope of Christ with them? When we are overwhelmed by the world's standards of greed, pride, anger, and malice, do you wonder if our society is hopelessly doomed to destruction? Jesus peered into the darkness of the world He entered and said to those He called out, "You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world."

Matthew 5:13–16

¹³ You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.

¹⁴ You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; ¹⁵ nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are

in the house. ¹⁶ Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

The Church's Relationship to the World

We must ask a fundamental question when examining Jesus' use of the two metaphors salt and light. What is the church's relationship with the world? Three possibilities are **assimilation, isolation, or transformation**. In J. B. Phillips' translation of the Bible, he translates Romans 12:2, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould." This is an example of **assimilation**, when the church is tamed by culture rather than the culture being changed by the church.

One of my favorite experiences is boating. Unfortunately, most of the time my boat is parked in the driveway. A boat is worthless unless it is in the water. However, even more troublesome is when you are in the boat that is in the water and notice water is entering your boat. The church is called to be in the world, but not of the world.

Religious persecution against Christians around the world is horrendous. Authoritarian governments, mobs, even family violence is perpetrated against Christians. The West has been remarkably free from that kind of persecution, although people of faith in America have experienced a growing hostility and been the targets of hate crimes. In the West, we do not hear of Christians being arrested, tortured, and killed to the degree that is occurring in many places in the world. We are protected because our forefathers' created laws that provide freedom of religion.

However, another reason why we have not been persecuted is because we have sadly become assimilated into our culture. Too often there is little distinction between the church and the world. Greed, prejudice, anger, and immorality are also found **in** the church. Congregations are tempted to turn to marketing schemes and downplaying biblical teachings and values in order to make the unchurched feel comfortable in our midst. The church cannot reach the world by becoming assimilated into the world.

If we are not to be assimilated does this mean the church should be **isolated** from the world? Christian alternatives for education, recreation, and social ministries may be essential to the development of strong families and for the preparation of well-grounded disciples for Christ. Yet does this also run the risk of isolating us from the world when we are supposed to be light. Jesus demonstrates the balance of withdrawing from the world to be energized by the Spirit, in order to reengage the world bringing light to places of darkness.

A church I once served had and continues to have a vibrant recreation ministry. Over 400 children participated in Upward basketball. During basketball season around 2000 folks, including athletes, families, and friends, came into our buildings to play or observe basketball. The coaches diligently reached into unchurched neighborhoods, in partnership with other churches serving in those communities, and provided opportunities for children who were excluded from school athletics, to be on a basketball team. The leaders served as compassionate Christian role models for children who for the most part had not yet experienced the love of Christ.

Christ is not calling the church to assimilation or isolation; He is calling us for **transformation**. If we were saved just to be protected from the evil one, Jesus would have taken us to Heaven the moment we were saved. Jesus prayed, “I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one” (John 17:15).

The Church’s Impact on the World (5:13–16)

How does God use the church to transform the world? He used the two metaphors: **salt and light**.

- Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth” (5:13).

Jesus called His followers **salt** not sugar. David was the business manager of a church I served. He was an excellent business manager but not a very good prankster. Each month we had a staff birthday luncheon where we celebrated the staffers whose birthday was that month. David was responsible for one of the gifts and believed he came up with a great idea. He went to a baker and asked for two cakes; one to be made with salt instead of sugar and the other one with the correct ingredients. He presented the cake to Charlene who was having a birthday, cut her a big piece of the salt cake, and waited for the hilarious response. However, Charlene was so nice, after taking the first bite, she did not want to offend and took another bite. Instead of laughing and throwing the cake at David, she got sick.

Salt is very distinctive and has little value in itself. Salt kept in a box is of no significance. No one sits down and eats a bowl of salt. Salt is only beneficial when it adds flavor to something

else or when it is used as a preservative to keep it from decay. The crowd listening to Jesus used salt to smear on fish to keep it safe or to spread on other meat to keep it from decay. Even today the practice of using salt as a preservative is used in many places without adequate refrigeration.

Salt

"Above all, salt was used as a preservative. Rubbed into meat, a little salt would slow decay. Strictly speaking salt cannot lose its saltiness; sodium chloride is a stable compound. But most salt in the ancient world derived from salt marshes or the like, rather than by evaporation of salt water, and therefore contained many impurities. The actual salt, being more soluble than the impurities, could be leached out, leaving a residue so dilute it was of little worth."¹

In modern Israel, savorless salt is used to put on flat roofs of houses to protect from leaks. Since children play on the roof, they trample this salt under foot.

We live in a world that appears to be steadily decaying. A nurse overheard a conversation of her peers who were shocked by a couple in the hospital having their first baby. They said with obvious disbelief, "They are married; and they have insurance!" This obviously indicated most mothers were unmarried and had no insurance. What may have been the norm for other generations may be today's exception. Yet when Jesus spoke of the narrow road that leads to life (Matthew 7:14), He referred to citizens of

the kingdom, who keep their promises, avoid adultery, and treat others as they wish to be treated themselves. When God's people live out the grace God gives them, they offer a distinction to lives in shambles by revealing an alternative lifestyle of joy and commitment.

- Jesus said, "You are the light of the world" (5:14).

Isaiah prophesied, "The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them" (Isaiah 9:2). Jesus said, "This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). Again, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness but will have the Light of life" (John 8:12). Later He said, "While I am in the world, I am the Light of the world" (John 9:5). In Matthew 5:14, Jesus said, "You are the light of the world."

We live in a world of moral darkness, filled with hopelessness where many live with no meaningful purpose regarding their origin or hope for their destination. The individuals we hold up as models for successful living often live inward lives of desperation, emptiness, shame, regret, and loneliness. God has placed the church as light in this world of darkness. The Holy Spirit empowers kingdom citizens to display the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22). Jesus taught that He is the vine, and we are the branches. He declared, "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples" (John 15:8). He continued in verse 11, "These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your

joy may be made full.” The darkness of the world cannot contain or overwhelm the light of Christ living within His church when we are filled with love, joy, and peace in contrast to the gloom of the world’s darkness.

When the Light Is Hidden

Phillip Keller lived in Africa for a number of years. He was on a little shuttle plane that only had about a dozen passengers, a pilot, and a flight attendant. They flew at an altitude of only about 4500 feet. The heat kept coming off those desert areas and caused the plane to bounce around causing a tumultuous flight. While they were flying, the passengers shared their experiences, laughed, and got to know each other. Perhaps they were attempting to mask their fear. When the plane stopped to refuel, a matronly missionary joined the passengers. She was grumpy, complaining about the seats, the flight attendant, the bumpy flight, and the pilot whom she accused of being on his maiden flight. All of a sudden, a pall settled over the group. “Sitting so prim and proper in her self-preoccupation, her entire demeanor had a deadening impact on the other passengers. People began to mutter to one another. Cruel jests and cutting sarcasm were directed toward her. I was ashamed to see the scorn and ridicule brought upon the character of Christ by one who claimed to be His follower.”²

Earl Palmer, who was the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley, California, shared a story of a friend of his

who was a premedical undergraduate at University of California, who became a Christian after a long journey through doubts and questions. Palmer asked him what helped him to become a Christian. “He told of a bout with flu that hit him very hard during the previous school term, forcing him to miss ten days of school. During that critical absence from his organic chemistry class a classmate who happened to be a Christian carefully collected all assignments and work for him in the chemistry class and then took the time away from his own studies to help him catch up to the rest of the class. The student told Palmer, ‘You know that this just is not done, but he gave me that help without any fanfare or complaints. I wanted to know what made this friend of mine act the way he did; I found myself asking him if I could go to church with him.’ God used this salt-and-light Christian to tip the scales in the life of this student toward the Lord.”³

Implications and Actions

A Christian attorney in Rio de Janeiro, Andre, who works with our religious freedom organization, became concerned with the plight of those living at risk in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the U.S. troops. Even those fortunate enough to escape were often trapped in refugee camps. He began to work with Brazilian government officials to find a way for some of them to immigrate to Brazil. He was told they would be allowed to enter only if there were guarantees for their housing, food, clothing, and other essentials for them once they arrived. The Baptists of Brazil came to the rescue by covering every government stipulation. They have generously met the needs of hundreds of these refugees.

Many of the Afghans who have been resettled in Brazil, are Muslims who worked for Christian organizations or military contractors. They have been overwhelmed by the provisions, compassion, and care of these new Christian friends. When our team went to Brazil, we met hundreds of these refugees including one family who was adopted by Andre's church. The family arrived in Brazil without their thirteen- and fourteen-year-old sons who were detained in Turkey just as the parents and two younger children were ready for their flight. The parents were grief stricken over the separation from their boys. Even though they were Muslims, their Christian hosts prayed with them for the protection and arrival of the boys. Differing faiths made no difference, as new Brazilian friends prayed passionately for the boy's protection and tirelessly worked to bring the boys back to their parents. One year later, the reunion happened. The family felt awed at the love and care these previous strangers showed for their family.

The mother began having dreams of Jesus and soon gave her life to Christ. A few weeks later her husband also professed his faith in Jesus. Instead of facing the darkness of their situation in Afghanistan, they have their own apartment, a pathway for citizenship in Brazil and a church full of Baptist brothers and sisters who love them.

When the church brings the light of Christ to those living in hopeless situations of darkness in our communities and around the world, many will seek Jesus, just as the Afghan family in Brazil. The Light of the world has shined in their lives to the glory of their Father in Heaven.

Questions

1. How can the church act as salt in a world filled with decay?
2. What did our Brazilian friends do to reflect light to families across the world who were living in despair?
3. Who are some of the folks living in darkness in our community?
4. How can we share the hope of Christ with them?

5. Is our church perceived by our community more as the Brazilian Baptists reaching out to the refugees or by the self-absorbed missionary in Africa?

ENDNOTES

¹ Frank E. Gaebelin, General Editor, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Matthew*: D. A. Carson, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 138.

² W. Philip Keller, *Salt for Society*, (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1981), 148–149.

³ Earl F. Palmer, *The Enormous Exception*, (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1986), 34.

lesson 3



Nip It in the Bud!

MAIN IDEA

The grace Jesus offers leads to a transformed life resulting in an obedience from the heart.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

What spiritual disciplines do I need to cultivate to control anger and lust?

STUDY AIM

Sins of the flesh usually begin as temptations of the mind. We must protect our mind, resisting temptation before it has an opportunity to produce evil actions.

QUICK READ

Jesus commands His followers to resist anger, lust, and broken marriage vows before it leads to murder, adultery, and divorce.

Introduction

The great theologian Barney Fife, a character played by Don Knotts on the Andy Griffith show back in the 1960s, made famous the expression, “Nip it in the bud.” The statement means taking care of a problem in its early stages before it gets too big to manage. The Law said, “Don’t murder.” Jesus told His followers, “Don’t even be angry with your brother!” The ancients were told, “Don’t commit adultery.” Jesus said, “Don’t even lust!”

One of the most important questions in life is, “How can we enter the kingdom of heaven?” The answer to this question has implications for our lives now and for all eternity. Jesus addressed this issue in Matthew 5:20, that I believe is one of the key verses in the Sermon on the Mount. He said only those who are more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees will enter the kingdom of Heaven. How can this be true? No one was more righteous than these religious leaders scrupulous in their attempt to keep the Law. They actually went beyond what the Law required. In the Old Testament, we hear about one day of fasting, yet the Pharisees fasted two days a week. They tithed every leaf in their garden. How can anyone be more righteous than they were?

Jesus spoke of a kingdom grace that transforms the heart. When Moses repeated the commandments in Deuteronomy 5, the people said, “We hear what you are saying, and we will do it.” God responded, “Oh that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear Me and keep all My commandments always” (Deuteronomy 5:29).

Jesus came to give them a new heart.

Matthew 5:17–32

¹⁷ Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth shall pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

²⁰ For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

²¹ You have heard that the ancients were told, "You shall not commit murder" and "Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court." ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, "You good for nothing," shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, "You fool," shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. ²³ Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. ²⁵ Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent.

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 lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰ If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell.

³¹ It was said, "Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce"; ³² but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Does Grace Cancel the Law? (5:17–20)

Jesus did not abolish the Law; He came to fulfill it. When He mentioned the Law and the Prophets, He was speaking of all of the Old Testament. The Old Testament was not incomplete or irrelevant. Jesus did not replace the Law with grace. Grace is found throughout the Old Testament. The Old Testament is the container and Jesus came to fill the container full. All of the Law and the Prophets were fulfilled in Jesus. God gave the Law to establish order in the world and to reveal His holiness.

After Jesus' resurrection, He overtook two individuals who were returning home to Emmaus after Jesus had been crucified. They were puzzled at the turn of events because they must have

been among the many who were hoping Jesus was the Messiah. Even after His death they heard rumors that Jesus was now alive. Jesus said to them, “O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?” Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:25–27).

Jesus fulfilled the prophecies: a virgin shall conceive (Isaiah 7:14), His birth will be in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), the people walk in darkness (Isaiah 9:2), His name will be called Wonderful Counselor (Isaiah 9:6). In Isaiah 53 the prophet foretold that He would be pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. In verse 6, “All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.” In Isaiah 53:12, “He Himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors.” The penalty for sin is death and Jesus paid the price for all of us. “So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men” (Romans 5:18). The writer of Hebrews wrote that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises of Jeremiah 31:33, “I will put My laws into their minds, and I will write them on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be My people” (Hebrews 8:10).

The Old Testament Is Complete

"The verb 'to fulfill' suggests the image of a vessel which is filled to the top. The vessel here referred to is the written Word, the Law, and the Prophets; and this vessel is filled when what the Word records occurs. The mission of Jesus is to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, not partially, but *in toto*. His entire mission is embraced in the one word, 'fulfilled' (*plerosai*), which therefore, is used in the second statement without an object, in absolute sense. When Jesus is through working, the whole Old Testament will be fulfilled. The meaning of the verb is altered when it is thought to signify 'to complete,' as though His teaching or His work Jesus is to finish what the Old Testament began. The Old Testament is already complete, for it describes all that the Messiah and His kingdom will be. It needs no addition and should suffer no subtraction. The vessel needs no enlargement or alteration; all it awaits is to be filled full by what Jesus is and does."¹

Watch Out for Anger! (5:21–26)

Six times in Matthew 5, the Greek emphatic pronoun, *ego*, "I Myself, say to you" was used by Jesus to describe the distinction with what He was saying and what the ancients taught (5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, and 44). First, He illustrated this as it relates to murder. As we study the commandments in Exodus 20, most of us probably breathe a sigh of relief when we are commanded not to murder. We may come up short when it speaks of bearing false

witness or coveting, but hopefully we have not murdered anyone. Yet when Jesus spoke of this command, none of us is left without His condemnation. Jesus said if we are angry, we are guilty before the court. If anyone calls his brother, *Raka*, or good for nothing, we are guilty before the supreme court. He then challenged us all by saying if we call another person, “You fool,” we will be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.

Have we ever seen more anger than is in our world today? Globally we hear of acts of atrocities against folks for no other reason than their gender, ethnicity, or faith. Hate crimes are accelerating throughout our own society. Democrats and Republicans hate each other. Racial abhorrence may have never been more acute since the 1960s. Jesus’ term, *Raka*, is a transliteration from Aramaic. It is a sound made when one is clearing the throat (pardon the graphic illustration) getting ready to spit. The Greek word for fool is *móros*, where we get our word moron, or imbecilic. When we use these expressions, we are dismissing as worthless persons created by God in His image. Of course, this is offensive, not just against the person or group of people who are targets of our anger but also to the One who created them and died for them on the cross.

Jesus continued the command by saying before we expect our worship to be acceptable, we must pay our debts and be reconciled with our brother.

Don’t Even Think About It! (5:27–32)

Jesus’ teachings about adultery and divorce raises many questions. When does temptation become lust? Does God really ex-

pect us to pluck out our eyes? What does it mean to commit adultery? Is divorce permissible for followers of Christ? What does unchastity mean? Do divorced people live in a state of sin?

If Jesus' command is for us to literally pluck out our eyes, our churches would be full of one-eyed people. While the previous questions may present difficult conclusions, there are some obvious assumptions. First, lust is serious. "But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death" (James 1:14–15). One of the greatest blessings in life is the anticipation and birth of a healthy child. Every step of the development of a child is anticipated by attentive parents. As the birth date grows near, the nursery is prepared, and the family and friends are waiting for the celebration. One of life's greatest tragedies occurs when the child is not alive at birth. James used this painful illustration to expose the tragedy of the seriousness of temptation, when conceived, it gives birth to sin and yet when it is accomplished it brings death, not the joy lust has promised.

Lust never brings fulfilment. Our society is overrun by pornography and all kinds of immorality. Small children are exposed through social media, television, cell phones, and other electronic devices to acts of immorality originally shown only to perverts in shady establishments a generation ago. Glances become stares, stares become thoughts, and thoughts become actions. Look at the lives of those who advocate irresponsible sex for pleasure and evaluate their lives. Does it bring lasting joy, meaningful relationships, and healthy families?

Who Is Exempt From the Consequences of Lust

God is no respecter of persons. His commands are the same for men and women. Throughout history many societies have a double standard for men and women. In the story of John 8, a woman was brought to Jesus who was caught in adultery. They were ready to stone her to death. But where was the man? Doesn't it take more than one for an act of adultery? In Genesis 38, we find the story of Judah, the son of Jacob, whose daughter-in-law Tamar was found to be with child by harlotry. He commanded her to be burned to death. Later he learned that the child she bore was actually his. Judah said, "She is more righteous than I" (Genesis 38:26). In Matthew 5 Jesus condemned a man who lusts for a woman, showing that neither men nor women are exempt from the consequences of lust.

A second observation is marriage vows are not to be broken. Sex is a gift from God for a man and woman who are committed to each other as companions for life within the context of marriage. We begin marriage with vows before God, to each other and verified by witnesses. By the grace of God, we should be faithful to those vows as long as we live. This is not Jesus' only teaching about divorce. In Matthew 19:3–12, He explained in more detail in a conversation with some Pharisees who asked if there is any justification for divorce. Jesus responded, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. And I

say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery” (19:8–9).

We hear Jesus pleading with us. Don’t get caught in the trap. Don’t throw your life away. Don’t destroy your marriage, ruin your reputation with others, or lose respect from your children. Commit yourself to Christ in faithfulness and purity and let Him make you into the kind of kingdom citizen He wants you to be. Don’t settle for less than His plan for you?

Implications and Actions

8 Truths for Overcoming Anger and Lust

1. Acknowledge the holiness of God. He is light and there is no darkness in Him.
2. Recognize that God hates sin because He loves you.
3. Know that God has a plan for you that is greater than any plan you would have dreamed for yourself.
4. Commit yourself to the truth that God’s plan for marriage is for it to be a permanent relationship of one man and one woman totally and freely committed to each other for life.
5. Sex outside of marriage is always wrong.
6. Accept God’s forgiveness. All of us have sinned and God is faithful to forgive our sins when we confess them (Romans 3:23 and 1 John 1:9).
7. Run from lust. “Now flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart” (2 Timothy 2:22).
8. Fill your mind with music, movies, books, and conversations that are good, pure, and uplifting (Philippians 4:8–9).

Questions

1. What was Jesus' relationship to the Old Testament?
2. When have I treated another person with contempt?
3. How does our anger affect our worship?
4. What steps should I take to protect myself and my family from lust?
5. What do I need to do to receive God's forgiveness for my anger and lust?

ENDNOTES

¹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1943), 205–206.

lesson 4



Blessed Are the Peacemakers

MAIN IDEA

A peacemaker must be honest, rejecting retaliation, benevolent, and loving.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

How can I respond with kindness in a situation where I have been mistreated?

STUDY AIM

Our attitude toward our adversaries changes when we perceive them as persons for whom Christ died.

QUICK READ

When we keep our word, share our resources, and love our enemies, we bring glory to God by reflecting His nature.

Introduction

John Sculley was the President of PepsiCo when he left to join Apple Inc., on April 8, 1983. Chuck Swindoll writes about his conversation with Apple cofounder, Steve Jobs, who asked Sculley to leave his prestigious position with a well-established firm to join the ranks of an unproven outfit with no guarantee, other than the excitement of one man's transforming vision. Jobs asked Sculley, "Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water or do you want a chance to change the world?"¹

Jesus was seeking followers He could transform who were willing to change the world. His plan was not a show of force, nor by domination or intimidation; but His weapon was love. Kingdom citizens were to be more than just religious keepers of the letter of the law. **Avoiding** murder or adultery **was not enough**. Jesus called His followers to a kind of love that overcame anger, lust, and empty promises. Jesus sought peacemakers who were honest, nonretaliatory, benevolent, and compassionate, even toward their enemies. These followers required a new nature, a transformation of the heart. An excellent resource for this is Dallas Willard's book, *Renovation of the Heart*.

Matthew 5:33–48

³³ Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, "You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord." ³⁴ But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king, ³⁶ nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you

cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ But let your statement be, "Yes, yes" or "No, no"; anything beyond these is of evil.

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 an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. ⁴⁰ If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. ⁴¹ Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. ⁴² Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you.

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 cause His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

A Peacemaker Is Honest (5:33–37)

Jesus commanded His followers to make no oaths. Some interpret this to mean it is wrong to take an oath of office or swear in court with your hand on the Bible or even say the Pledge of Allegiance. Jesus called out the religious leaders in Matthew 23:16–22, who developed a system of deceit making some oaths binding and others nonbinding. If they swore on the sanctuary,

it was not binding but if they swore on the gold of the Temple, it was obligated. If anyone swore by the altar, it was nonbinding, but if he swore by the offering, it was binding. Jesus called them hypocrites.

Do you remember as a child having secret codes that made some things authentic and others pretend? A universal practice was crossing your fingers. A statement made while crossing your fingers was nullified. Tragically, this practice carries over into adulthood. Some contracts are written using confusing or contradictory language to obfuscate the meaning. Some politicians appear to say one thing while practicing the opposite. We are tempted to say what others want to hear, changing our positions depending on the audience. This is not only true for politicians but even pastors following in the example of the religious leaders of the time of Jesus.

Jesus asked why we should swear by Heaven because we have no authority over it, nor by the earth, for we cannot subdue the earth, nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king. He even points out the folly of swearing by our head because we cannot even change the color of our hair. I guess today Jesus might humorously say we cannot keep it from falling out.

The point of Jesus' teaching appears to be integrity. When Caiaphas asked Jesus to swear by an oath if He was the Christ, Jesus answered, "You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matthew 26:64). In Romans 9:1, the Apostle Paul makes a threefold promise concerning his passion for his Hebrew brethren, "I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit."

Jesus did not appear to be condemning written guarantees or pledges of loyalty but declaring that a kingdom citizen must be transparently honest. They should have no hidden agendas. Let your statement be “Yes,” or “No.” Nothing more is needed.

A Peacemaker Does Not Try to Get Even (5:38–39)

One of the most debatable things Jesus said is found in verses 38–41. “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth,’ but I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two.” Yet He never asked something of us He was unwilling to do Himself. On the cross Jesus cried out, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

The law restricting retaliation in Exodus 21:24 was actually a command of grace. When God limited His people to be restrained in their vengeance, an eye for an eye, this was a difficult saying. Our natural inclination is to “get even” when others harm us, or more likely to exact greater punishment. Yet Jesus requires compassion; He said do not strike back at an evil person instead turn the other cheek when you are slapped.

Is Jesus calling His followers to turn a blind eye toward injustice and live lives of naivety, pretending or hoping good will ultimately prevail? Our world is filled with stories of atrocities committed against children and innocent people. What kind of world allows evil to go unpunished?

Jesus is not giving instructions to kingdoms or nations. God ordained civil government. In Romans 13:1, we find, “Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities.” At the end of verse 4, it continues, “for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.” Paul urged Timothy in 1 Timothy 2:2, to pray for kings and all who are in authority, “so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity.”

Jesus was addressing personal retaliation. Typically, a right-handed person who hits another would land it on his left cheek. For him to strike a person on the right cheek infers he slapped him with the back of his hand, a sign of contempt. This would not be an attempt to inflict harm but an action to dehumanize him.

Jesus spoke of kingdom citizens whom He is transforming into His own likeness. Jesus expressed anger against injustice as He did with those who turned God’s Temple into a den of thieves. Yet He was silent when He experienced indignity done against Himself. He was like a lamb going to the slaughter. A peacemaker is one who refuses to get even; but instead, responds with love to his accuser in an attempt to show the love of Christ. Stephen’s prayer for his assailants had to be a factor in Paul’s later conversion (Acts 7:60).

“Martin Luther interpreted the Sermon on the Mount in light of Jesus’ formula ‘Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.’ Christians maintain a dual citizenship, one in the kingdom of Christ and one in the kingdom of the world. The extremism in the Sermon on the Mount applies absolutely to Christ’s kingdom, but not to the world’s. Take the commands to ‘Love

your enemies' and 'Do not resist an evil person;' of course, these do not apply to the state! In order to prevent anarchy, a government must resist evil and repel enemies. Therefore, a Christian should learn to separate the office from the person: a Christian soldier, say, must carry out orders to fight and kill even while following Christ's law of love for enemies in his heart."²

A Peacemaker Is Generous (5:40–42)

Many of Jesus' hearers were poor. If they gave an adversary their shirt it would literally have been the shirt off their back. They were also subject to the governing Romans who were their oppressors. By law, the Romans could force a Jew to carry their enemies' load up to a mile. Why did Jesus ask a poor person to give his last shirt away, or go two miles carrying his oppressors' bags, or even to give to those who ask him for help? This action would have been degrading and humiliating.

"In this way Jesus graphically illustrates the disciple's mastery over his own heart and will in keeping himself free from the natural bitter passions to which sin makes us prone. All three examples, however, are intended only for the spiritual interest of the disciple and never for a moment for those who inflict injustice upon him, never to abet them or to encourage them in their baseness."³

If a person's goal is the accumulation of wealth, this lifestyle creates suspicions and greed causing an impulse to hold onto everything a person owns. Generosity is the opposite of greed. A symbol of our society might be a closed hand. How do we grasp all we can and hold on to it, keeping our wealth away from others

who seek to seize it? Yet Jesus' example is the opposite. In Philippians 2:5–11, the picture of Christ is One who gave Himself away rather than grasping what was rightfully His. Instead of the symbol of grasping of the closed hand, a Christ follower must be one with an open hand, giving himself away because of a love for others.

While there are many examples of wealthy philanthropists who donate great sums of money for those in need, I have observed the poor are often the ones most willing to share their home, their table, or even their shirts with others in need. Watch the response of the populace at the Salvation Army's Christmas kettles. Many of us who have much walk right by without making eye-contact with the ringer. Yet seldom do the poor pass by without some kind of contribution. When Jesus announced at the beginning of His ministry that He came to "preach the gospel to the poor" (Luke 4:18), He reminds us that the ones often most responsive to the good news of Christ are those who have the least.

A Peacemaker Is Compassionate (5:43–48)

The ultimate challenge for a peacemaker is to love his enemies. Just as our heavenly Father sends rain and causes the sun to rise on the just and the unjust, we are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Two of the countries where the church is growing most quickly are Iran and China, two nations totally opposed to religious freedom. The most powerful evangelistic tool for the church in these nations is love.

When Stephen was being stoned by those who hated him, in his death he cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!"

(Acts 7:60). On the cross Jesus cried out, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Getaneh is a friend of mine who faced severe persecution in his home country of Ethiopia. At one time, he was hung upside down, beaten, and they poured hot oil over his body. When Getaneh tells the story, he shares how God gave him a love for those persecuting him and he prayed for God’s grace on his persecutors. Getaneh lived to tell the story and created a ministry, Watch and Pray, that continues to offer the hope of Christ to thousands throughout his home country. Hundreds of pastors call Getaneh their bishop and seek to follow his example of compassion.

Four Steps

Clarence Jordan writes of four steps defined to progress toward God’s final purpose: unlimited retaliations, limited retaliations, limited love, and unlimited love.⁴ *Unlimited retaliation* is the response of one who is offended and is unrestrained in his reaction. If you knock out one of my teeth, I will knock out all of yours. *Limited retaliation* occurs when one follows the rule of Exodus 21:24, an “eye for eye, tooth for tooth.” *Limited love* is what Jesus was referring to when He said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy (Matthew 5:43).’” *Unlimited love* requires the agape love of Christ when one loves even his enemy. Jordan continues, “For kingdom citizens, love must be the basis of all relationships and that it must be applied universally, both to one’s race and nation and to those of other races and nations.”⁵

Love As Jesus Loves

David Garland and David Dockery share three reasons why Jesus commanded that we love our enemy. First, Jesus pointed out that this is God's way. God sends the sun and the rain on the good and the evil. Second, Jesus insisted on the love of enemies because it is the only way to overcome hatred. Hatred only begets hatred. Third, is the fact that the principle of an eye for an eye might be good enough for tax collectors and pagans, but it is not good enough for disciples. If you love only those who love you, it is simply a business deal. "You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours." Jesus followers are to love all even as God loves them.⁶

Implications and Actions

Jesus concludes this section saying, "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." The word *perfect* is a translation of the Greek word *telos*, also meaning end, goal, or limit. What is God's goal for His followers? He desires us to live the life He has created us to live. The Apostle Paul's goal was, "I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:12).

Greed, envy, and bitterness have no place in the lives of Jesus' followers. He calls us and equips us for a life of compassion, grace, and generosity.

Questions

1. When have I been less than transparent in my conversation and actions with my friends and family?
2. How can I overcome a long-standing grudge in my life against someone who harmed me?
3. In what systematic way can I faithfully and frequently share with others in need?
4. How can Christians demonstrate the love of Christ in our world filled with anger and hostility over politically and socially divisive issues?

ENDNOTES

¹ Charles R. Swindoll, *Flying Closer to the Flame*, (1993), 27.

² Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 134.

³ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1943), 243.

⁴ Clarence Jordan, *Sermon on the Mount*, (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1952), 62.

⁵ Jordan, 66.

⁶ David S. Dockery and David E. Garland, *Seeking the Kingdom*, (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1992), 67–68.

lesson 5



Have You Noticed My Humility?

MAIN IDEA

Our worship is unacceptable to God when we are seeking the approval of others.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Do I unconsciously exploit others who are in need even in my acts of charity?

STUDY AIM

To beware of selfish motives in our public demonstrations of worship and charity

QUICK READ

When we practice righteousness to be seen by others, we receive our full reward. When our righteousness is an outward expression of our relationship with God, He will repay.

Introduction

In the first part of Matthew 6, Jesus spoke of charity, prayer, and fasting. All three of these actions are worthy, unlike Jesus' admonition in Matthew 5 about anger, murder, lust, adultery, and lying. In the fifth chapter, He said we are to let our light shine, yet in chapter six, He admonished us to pray and give alms in secret. Is chapter six a contradiction of chapter five? Of course not. Jesus warned of cowardice in chapter five and vanity in chapter six.

His three examples of giving alms, prayer, and fasting are in themselves praiseworthy. Jesus did not say "if you give alms," or "if you pray," or "if you fast;" He said "when" we do these things. This assumes that these acts of caring will be present in the life of a believer.

What is our motivation for righteousness? If we practice these things in order to be praised by others, our actions are absolutely meaningless, and we have no reward from God. In each example He uses the word hypocrite, a transliteration of the Greek word that means "play actor." In Greek drama each actor may play several roles. He would pick up a mask for each part and hold it in front of his face while playing a specific role and change masks when changing characters. Jesus described vain worshipers as those who are playing a role, seeking the approval of men, yet rejected by God.

Matthew 6:1–8, 16–18

¹ Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your

Father who is in heaven. ² So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. ³ But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. ⁵ When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. ⁶ But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. ⁷ And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸ So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

¹⁶ Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. ¹⁷ But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face ¹⁸ so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

What Is Your Intention for Charity? (6:1–4)

In the Cotton Patch Gospel version of the Sermon on the Mount, Clarence Jordan used the word **phony** instead of hypocrite. One who seeks credit for almsgiving, public praise for his prayer, and admiration for fasting, is a phony; authentic worship has been co-opted by religious hypocrisy and is worthless to God.

Sharing with those less fortunate was a matter of Hebrew law. When harvesting the land, they were to leave barley and grain for the needy and strangers among them (Leviticus 19:9–10). In keeping with this tradition, Boaz commanded his servants to allow Ruth to glean among the sheaves (Ruth 2:15). She would later become his wife and an ancestor of David and of the lineage of Jesus. This benevolence for the needy was continued in the New Testament. When Paul and Barnabas were sent out from Antioch, they always collected an offering for the poor. Even though the churches of Macedonia were faced with great affliction, they still begged for the opportunity to participate in the support of the saints (2 Corinthians 8:1–4). When Cornelius, a centurion, and God-fearing Gentile, called out to God, a man stood before him in shining garments and said, “Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God” (Acts 10:31). Sincere alms giving and prayer were a blessing to God.

Giving to others is a commandment for Christians. In Matthew 25:31–46, Jesus spoke of the righteous as those who provide for the hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, and in prison as acts of giving to Jesus Himself. The righteous did not perform charity to score points with God or recognition for themselves. They even asked, “Lord, when did we see You hungry?” (25:37).

Care was given to those in need because that is the nature of a Christ-follower. The church has been the inspiration and catalyst for deeds of benevolence throughout the ages. Hospitals, shelters for the homeless, resources for immigrants, disaster relief, food pantries, and supporting legislation that provide for the needy have resulted from Matthew 25 ministries.

Yet when these actions are taken for personal recognition, they run the risk of actually dehumanizing the recipients, treating the person in need as an object of our goodwill, while displaying condescending attitudes by looking down on the subjects of our generosity.

We too are tempted to give to others motivated by a desire to bring honor to ourselves. William Barclay writes of an eastern custom in ancient days where water was so scarce it could be sold. When someone wanted to do a good deed, he would fill a vessel with water and go to the marketplace and call out to the thirsty, "Bless me and I will give you this drink." "People like that put on an act of giving which is designed only to glorify themselves."¹

"One family in a small church made a large donation to that church every Christmas. It was their 'Christmas present to the Lord.' One year they bought all new pulpit furniture. Another year they presented the church with a new communion service. Another year they made a major contribution to the steeple fund, and the next year they gave generously to the organ fund. Always the gift would be in the name of some deceased member of the family. When possible, a plaque would be placed somewhere in the church to commemorate the gift. The other church members were always grateful and duly impressed with the family's generosity. What only a few members of the congregation knew, how-

ever, was that the members of the generous family never gave at any other time during the year. They essentially saved up all their tithes so that they could make one large and noticeable gift each year.”²

Jesus was saying when you give alms, don’t sound a trumpet before you, or seek recognition. Don’t even let your right hand know what your left hand is doing. God sees what is done in secret; and He will reward you.

What Is Your Incentive for Prayer? (6:5–8)

Jesus gave two warnings about prayer before teaching the Model Prayer: beware of public prayer and refuse meaningless repetitions. Both of these are hazards for those of us who are preachers. As a pastor, I have had numerous opportunities to lead in public prayers. I have prayed before football games, city council meetings, service organizations, and charity events, as well as duties as a pastor praying in hospitals, weddings, funerals, and public worship. When I lived in the D.C. community, I was guest chaplain for the U.S. House and Senate on several occasions. While I was a pastor in Arkansas, I was Chaplain of the Arkansas House of Representatives for two terms. I appreciated how Peter Marshall must have felt when he was Chaplain of the Senate when he was asked, “Do you pray for the Senators?” He answered, “No, I look at the Senators and pray for the country.”

Even though it is important to know how to pray for those gathered on any occasion, the temptation is always there to attempt to impress those who are listening. The temptation is to stay around after an event hoping to hear, “Good prayer, Rev-

erend.” Jesus called that kind of piety, phony. He rebuked the religious leaders who showed up in the synagogues and street corners praying to be seen by men. He warned, they have no heavenly reward.

Jesus also exposed the hypocrisy of meaningless repetitions in prayers. When the Jews repeated the *Shema* every morning and evening, it might easily have become trivial, ritualistic, and meaningless. In 1 Kings 18, the prophets of Baal called out to their god from morning until evening, dancing around the altar, even cutting themselves with knives. Yet their god was not real and unable to answer them. Elijah responded with a simple two sentence prayer to *Yahweh* and God answered with fire from Heaven.

Jesus was not rebuking persistent prayer; He spent all night in prayer on occasions. In the Garden of Gethsemane, He prayed for hours and admonished the disciples for being unable to stay awake and pray. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, “Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18).

Was Jesus saying we should avoid praying in public? Did He advise us against using written prayers of others? Obviously not, because right after these admonitions He prayed publicly giving us an example of a prayer we continue to use as a model prayer. Jesus and His followers went to the Temple to pray. Quoting from Isaiah 56:7, Jesus was angry at the money changers in the Temple and said, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a robbers’ den’” (Matthew 21:13). Even after the resurrection the disciples continued to pray in the

Temple. “Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the ninth *hour*, the hour of prayer” (Acts 3:1).

Jewish Prayer

No nation had a higher ideal of prayer than the Jews. Every Jew was supposed to pray two prayers every day. The *Shema*, Deuteronomy 6:4–9; 11:13–21; and Numbers 15:37–41, had to be recited by every Jew every morning and evening. They were also to repeat the *Shemoneh ‘es-reh*, meaning the Eighteen, consisting of eighteen short prayers. An example of these prayers is found in the fifth one, “Bring us back to Thy law, O our Father; bring us back, O King, to Thy service; bring us back to Thee by true repentance. Praised be Thou, O Lord, who dost accept our repentance.” The devout Jew had certain times for prayer; the third, sixth, and ninth hours (9 a.m., 12 noon, and 3 p.m.).

The Jews disciplined approach to prayer might be a genuine worship experience, but it could also become ritualistic. “There was a danger here, the danger that a man might come to think of God as being confined to certain holy places and that he might forget that the whole earth is the temple of God.”³

God warned against hypocrisy. Acts of piety performed for the approval of others are meaningless. Prayer is essential to the life of a disciple and must be entered into with humility, sincerity, and praise.

What Is Your Inspiration for Fasting? (6:16–18)

The only prescribed time for fasting in the Old Testament was the Day of Atonement. Yet by Jesus' time, the Pharisees observed fasting two days a week, Mondays and Thursdays. Jesus humorously described their demeanor; they put on a gloomy face, did not wash their face, and neglected their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men.

Fasting was an important part of the story of the New Testament. John the Baptist and his followers fasted. Jesus fasted for forty days and nights. The early church practiced fasting. Before sending Barnabas and Paul on their first missionary journey, the church in Antioch was ministering to the Lord and fasting. The Holy Spirit answered and said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2). Perhaps today Jesus might add the rebuke for our lack of fasting. How often are we encouraged to practice fasting as a spiritual discipline? Other than giving up chocolate for Lent, we hear few admonishments to refrain from eating so our desires may be focused on God and His plans for our lives.

Fasting to be noticed by men will not be rewarded by our Father who knows our heart. However, when we get alone with God, or join with others from the church for times of fasting and praying for God's kingdom work to be done on earth as it is in Heaven, God hears our prayers and changes our hearts.

God Knows My Heart

"Jesus and His disciples avoided every appearance of the 'sad-eyed, hypocritical fasting.' Jesus had no clerical garb or ministerial tone to enhance His professional dignity, nor did His followers wear 'religious' clothes or in any outward way give the appearance of piety. They did not call each other 'Reverend' or 'Doctor' (Matthew 23:8–10). They had no lapel buttons and no slogans. They had no fast days, and by looking at them you never would know if and when they spent all night in prayer. They simply did not look at all as religious people should have looked."⁴

Implications and Actions

Jesus warns His followers to guard against the temptations for earthly praise and hypocritical religion that spoil the blessing of genuine charity, prayer, and fasting. We are reminded of the Old Testament promise God gave to Solomon, "And My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14).

Questions

1. When have I failed to offer assistance to a person in need when I was presented with the opportunity?
2. Do I have a systematic plan for assistance to the poor without calling attention to myself or degrading them?
3. How can I resist the temptation for public applause when praying in public?
4. How can we make corporate prayer more meaningful?

5. How can I include fasting as an important part of my spiritual discipline?

ENDNOTES

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1958), 187.

² Scott Nash, *The Sermon on the Mount: Studies and Sermons*, (Greenville, SC: Smith & Helwys, 1992), 130.

³ Barclay, paraphrase of 190–194.

⁴ Clarence Jordan, *Sermon on the Mount*, (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1989), 78.

lesson 6

Praying Like Jesus

MAIN IDEA

Jesus gave us an example of our attitude and method of prayer.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Why is it important for me to begin my prayer with praise?

STUDY AIM

Jesus teaches us to pray with boldness calling God our Father yet with reverence coming before Him with all humility.

QUICK READ

Jesus' model prayer brackets our requests for provisions and forgiveness with a focus on God in praise for whom He is and blessing Him for what He does.

Introduction

Early in my ministry as a pastor, I had the privilege to go to Korea. Even though the nation was still experiencing significant poverty, they were in the midst of an incredible revival. I quickly realized the spiritual awakening was in response to their powerful commitment to prayer. The churches had prayer meetings every day around 5:00 a.m. I was amazed to see the buildings filled, including a significant number of youth and children, who walked or took city buses to the church before going to school. For about an hour the church prayed, at times all together with each praying out loud. At other times members from the congregation or pastors led times of prayer. Some worshipers lifted their hands in adoration and others bowed their faces to the ground in brokenness and humility.

I had the privilege of preaching a revival at First Baptist Church Pusan. Each night the building was filled including the foyer, aisles, and balcony. The service included significant times of prayer. When the invitation was given, there was no room for those making decisions to come to the front, so they raised their hands and counselors came to them. On Sunday afternoon I met with a about two hundred young adults who were Navigators dedicated to a disciplined life as followers of Christ. These fervent young adults committed themselves to prayer, Bible study, Scripture memory, evangelism, and service.

I had never seen anything like what I observed and unfortunately, I have never seen anything quite like it since then. The only explanation of this outpouring of God's Spirit on the church in Korea at that time, was, they were people who prayed.

In the midst of Jesus' teaching His followers about the nature of kingdom citizenship, He spent a significant portion of His time teaching them about prayer. In Luke 11:2–4, Jesus responded with a shorter version of the Lord's Prayer to His disciples who had just observed Him praying, when they asked, "Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples" (11:1).

Matthew 6:9–15

⁹ Pray, then, in this way: Our Father who is 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 do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. ¹⁴ For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

Before We Pray (6:5–8)

I do not know of any great godly man or woman of history who were not people disciplined in prayer. Neither do I recall any great spiritual awakening that was not preceded by folks who fell on their faces before God and prayed. There are many things we can do after we pray but I believe there is nothing of significance that we can do before we pray.

If prayer is so vital to the life of a believer or a church, why do we sin against God by praying so seldom? Perhaps it is because

prayer is one of the most difficult disciplines for a believer. Preparing and preaching a sermon or teaching a Sunday School class or committing to personal Bible study are all demanding. Evangelism is not easy nor is ministry to the bereaved or to the needy. Yet spiritual warfare may be more present in prayer than at any other time. In our prayer we understand what Paul has written, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual *forces* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*” (Ephesians 6:12). Martin Luther, who wrote the powerful hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” said the model prayer is the most beautiful passage in all Scripture. Luther knew from his own experience the spiritual warfare involved in prayer.

Jesus taught us to separate ourselves from distractions before we pray. Do not be seduced by the approval or recognition of others. Whether it means for us to go into our prayer closet by ourselves, or close our eyes to shut out all distractions, or fall on our faces in broken humility or stretch our hands upward seeking the face of God; prayer is conversation with the Lord. Temptation follows us even as we pray. The enemy will disrupt our prayers with worries of the world or entice us to pray for ideas or wishes that are not God’s will for our lives. Hurts from long ago will disturb our thoughts and plans for the future will divert our focus.

How do we concentrate during our prayers? Recognize that God is present; and know He has a plan and provisions for us even before we ask. Pray passages of Scripture that remind us of the goodness and holiness of God. Read meaningful prayers from others focusing our hearts on the presence of God. Quote, sing or recall hymns that express the desires of our heart to worship the

Lord. Have confidence that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are interceding for us with groanings too great for us to understand (Romans 8:26–27, 34). Memorize great biblical texts that we can pray back to the Lord. Be still and know that the Lord is God (Psalm 46:10). Use a hymnal along with your Bible—especially regarding praise and adoration.

When We Pray (6:9–15)

How then shall we pray? Jesus says, “Pray then, in this way.” Jesus begins with an *invocation* in the first part of verse 9, then continues through verse 10 with *adoration* and then shares *petitions* in verses 11–13.

The *invocation* is a summoning of God to receive our prayer as well as an invitation from Him for us to join Him. We begin with the privilege of calling God our Father. What an incredible privilege. First, we find the plural pronoun—*our*. Of course, Jesus has a special relationship with the Father since He is the only One called *monogena*, or only begotten Son in John 3:16. Yet He invites us to join with the cloud of witnesses in Hebrews 12:1, including those throughout the past generations as well as all who call on Him from around the world. We are all part of the body of Christ. I do not believe in lone ranger Christians. A foot by itself is worthless. Just as a body consists of many members, this is also true of the body of Christ. All Christian believers are one in Him. When we pray, we join with others from every nation, tribe, and ethnicity as brothers and sisters.

Calling God our Father may be a privilege we take for granted since this has been our practice for a lifetime. Yet it sounded

like heresy for those who first heard Him. “For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God” (John 5:18). In the Old Testament God was referred to as Father only 13 times, yet Jesus referred to God as Father over 150 times. The only time Jesus prayed to God without calling Him Father was on the cross when He cried out, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me” (Matthew 27:46)?

Jesus said to call out, “Our Father.” The Aramaic word for father is *abba*. Just as a young child first cries out *abba*, or dada, or daddy, Jesus has given us the privilege of calling out to God as one who would call out to his own father.

Calling God Father brings wonderful memories for me. There was never a moment in my life when I was in doubt about my father’s or mother’s love for me; nor did I ever doubt their love for each other. My parents always provided for us, taught us, disciplined us, encouraged us, and challenged us. They taught my sister and brothers and me to love God by their actions and their words. When I think of God as Father, I am comforted that He loves me, provides for me, and has a plan for me that is better than I could dream for myself.

Unfortunately, many do not have the same image of a father because their experience is much different. Perhaps they never had a dad or had one who neglected or abused them. My heart breaks for them. I pray they may find in God, the Father they always desired; One who loves them and One they can trust.

In the second part of verse 9 and in verse 10 we continue with *adoration*. “Hallowed be Your name.” God’s name is holy, sacred.

When Moses asked God His name in Exodus 3:13–14, God answered, “I Am Who I Am;” and He said, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I Am has sent me to you.’” God’s name *Yahweh* was derived from I Am. Jesus makes seven statements about Himself in the Gospel of John including calling Himself, “I am the light of the world.” In John 8:58, Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am.” His hearers heard Him refer to Himself as “I Am,” and picked up stones to throw at Him. God’s name was so holy that the Hebrew people refused to say His name. Jesus acknowledged that God’s name is holy, yet God has given us access to come into His presence.

“Your kingdom come.” The idea of kingdom is rule or reign. There is a sense that God’s rule has already come. John the Baptist said, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). Jesus preached, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). In Matthew 4:23, “Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people.” Jesus referred to the kingdom of heaven throughout the Sermon on the Mount (5:3, 10, 19, 20; 6:10, 33; and 7:21).

The kingdom of God is past tense but also present tense. God is working in the world today. His kingdom is also yet to come. The New Testament concludes with Jesus saying, “Yes, I am coming quickly.” And John responded, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20).

“Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” What did Jesus mean when He asked us to pray for God’s will to be done on earth?

A Strangely Different Kind of Kingdom

"To the crowd's dismay, it became clear that Jesus was talking about a strangely different kind of kingdom. The Jews wanted what people have always wanted from a visible kingdom: a chicken in every pot, full employment, a strong army to deter invaders. Jesus announced a kingdom that meant denying yourself, taking up a cross, renouncing wealth, even loving your enemies. As He elaborated, the crowd's expectations crumbled.

"By the time Jesus was nailed to wooden crossbeams, everyone had lost hope and fallen away. Scholars report that first-century Jews had no concept of a suffering Messiah. As for the Twelve, no matter how often or how plainly Jesus warned them of His impending death, it never sank in. No one could imagine a Messiah dying.

"The word kingdom meant one thing to Jesus and quite another thing to the crowd. Jesus was rejected, in large part, because he did not measure up to a national image of what a Messiah was supposed to look like."¹

Jesus then taught us to bring our *petitions* to God. "Give us this day our daily bread." I believe this is a reference to all of our physical needs. We are apparently well aware of this aspect of prayer. We often begin with personal petitions and spend most of our time there. Yet Jesus mentions this after we are aware that God is our Father, Who is holy, and desires us to seek God's will. This is not to relegate praying for physical needs as unimportant. Many of the folks who came to Jesus wanted Him to heal them

of their diseases. It would be a blessing to people who never had more than a day's rationing of food to have a Messiah who took a few fish and some loaves of bread and fed thousands.

Our physical needs are important to God. The disciples continued to perform miracles of healing after Jesus' resurrection. In James 5:16, the church is admonished to "pray for one another so that you may be healed." God's presence is often felt most keenly in times of great suffering and grief. We have the privilege to come before God just as boldly as blind Bartimaeus who said, "Lord, I want to regain my sight.' And Jesus said to him, 'Receive your sight; your faith has made you well'" (Luke 18:41–42).

One of the ways God meets our needs is through the generosity of the church. Wherever Paul preached, he took an offering for the poor. I believe we do not have a right to tell hungry children about Jesus. As we feed them, we can share the love of Christ.

"And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." In verses 14–15, Jesus reminded us, "human forgiveness and divine forgiveness are inextricably intercombined."² Does that mean forgiveness can only be earned in proportion to our acts of mercy? Wouldn't that be a gospel of works instead of grace?

If the cross teaches us anything, it reminds us of God's undeserving favor. We could never amass enough charity to overcome our debt to sin. Yet Jesus is not saying forgive us our debts on the basis of the fact we have forgiven others. He said *as* we have forgiven others. When we are unwilling to forgive others, we are unable to accept forgiveness. If you nail the door of forgiveness shut to keep others from receiving forgiveness, it is nailed shut from your direction as well when you need to go to God for forgiveness. Forgiveness means to let go. When we are unwilling to

let go of bitterness, anger, and resentment, how can we trust God to forgive us. Jesus reminded us that we are in a world faced with spiritual warfare. The devil seeks to kill, steal, and destroy (John 10:10). We must ask God daily to protect us from the evil one and clothe us with the armor of God that we might be filled with the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

An Approved Conclusion

"The NIV and other modern language translations do not include the concluding doxology [as in KJV, 6:13b]. It is commonly recognized that this was a later liturgical addition to give the prayer a proper ending (most likely based on David's prayer in 1 Chronicles 29:11–13). A few decades after the publication of the Gospel of Matthew, the doxology appears in the Didache's version of the model prayer. It certainly forms an appropriate conclusion"³ (bracket added).

Implications and Actions

"In the Sermon on the Mount brevity is linked with the assumption that God is aware of our needs and is graciously going to provide for them. Lengthy prayers are linked to the assumption that God will not answer unless humans cause him to do it. The larger context, however, indicates that the call to avoid babbling does not eliminate long periods of time spent in prayer or the repetition of one's requests."⁴

Jesus reminds us of the privilege of prayer and shares a model prayer to guide us in praying effectively. The prayer may be corporate or private, brief or lengthy. Yet in each situation we are aware of the great joy that is ours to spend time in the presence of the One Who created us for fellowship with Himself.

Questions

1. If God knows what we need before we ask, why do we pray?
2. What feeling comes to your mind when you think of God as our Father?
3. How does God answer the cries of folks in need through the resources He provides through the church?

4. Are unresolved situations of grievances against me restricting me from accepting the forgiveness of God?

5. Does God lead us into temptation?

ENDNOTES

¹ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 241–242.

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, (Edinburgh, Scotland: Saint Andrew Press, 1958), 223.

³ David S. Dockery and David E. Garland, *Seeking the Kingdom*, (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1992), 80.

⁴ Charles H. Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 119.

lesson

God or Wealth?

MAIN IDEA

A foolish person focuses on accumulating wealth that will perish while neglecting the treasure that lasts forever.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

What indicators help me to clarify what I treasure most?

STUDY AIM

Because we are constantly surrounded by the lure of possessions, we must commit ourselves to filling our minds with godly impulses.

QUICK READ

One cannot serve two masters. He will be loyal to one and neglect the other. Therefore, we must be committed to serving God not wealth.

Introduction

“In 1923 a very important meeting was held at the Edgewater Beach Hotel in Chicago. Attending this meeting were nine of the world’s most successful men; at least, they were men who found the secret of ‘making money.’

“Let us see what happened to these men twenty-five years later. The president of the largest independent steel company, **Charles Schwab**, died in bankruptcy and lived on borrowed money for five years before his death. The president of the greatest utility company, **Samuel Insull**, died a fugitive from justice and penniless in a foreign land. The president of the largest gas company, **Howard Hopson**, lost his sanity. The greatest wheat speculator, **Arthur Cullen**, died insolvent. The president of the New York Stock Exchange, **Richard Whitney**, was released from Sing Sing Penitentiary. The member of the President’s cabinet, **Albert Fall**, was pardoned so he could die at home. The greatest ‘bear’ on Wall Street, **Jesse Livermore**, died, a suicide. The head of the greatest monopoly, **Ivar Krueger**, died, a suicide. The president of the Bank of International Settlements, **Leon Fraser**, died, a suicide. All these men chose to learn the art of making a living, but none of them chose to learn how to live!”¹

Jesus addressed three essential questions in this section of the Sermon on the Mount: What is your treasure? Where is your focus? Who is your master? Our culture may have believed that the nine men mentioned above had the right answers to these questions when they were in their prime, yet at their death realized they had gambled on the wrong values. We must allow the Holy Spirit to examine our lives as we are confronted by these

questions to be sure we are not betting our lives on foolish promises.

Matthew 6:19–24

¹⁹ Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; ²¹ for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. ²² The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. ²³ But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! ²⁴ No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

What Is Your Treasure? (6:19–21)

In verses 19 and 20, Jesus used a form of the same word as both a verb “store” and noun “treasures.” Do not treasure for yourselves treasures on earth. Both verbs are in the present tense, indicating continuous action and are imperative commands. First it is stated negatively, “Do not store treasures on earth;” then positively, “But store for yourselves treasures in heaven.”

What was Jesus saying when He commanded us not to store treasures on earth? Are material things unimportant? Should we not buy houses, land, clothes, or other life necessities? At the end

of the Sermon, Jesus spoke of building a house on a solid foundation. In Matthew 25, Jesus praised those who share food and clothing to those who are in need. When we feed the hungry, we are feeding Christ. God created us as finite creatures living in a physical world that requires food, clothing, and shelter; and He expects us to provide for our families. The Apostle Paul wrote, work is ordained by God and a parent who fails to provide for his own family is worse than an unbeliever (1 Timothy 5:8). Yet in the very next chapter he instructed Timothy, “But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance, *and gentleness*” (1 Timothy 6:9–11).

Jesus’ emphasis is not on having possessions but on treasuring them. God did not give us this command to restrict us or to use this as some kind of test of allegiance. As God of all eternity, God recognizes the impermanence of physical possessions and the destruction that comes to those who spend their lives focusing on acquiring them. A sign of wealth for first century folks was clothing. Jesus addressed the obvious. How foolish it is to put your trust in something even a moth can destroy, or a thief can steal.

In 2022, most of us saw our retirement funds drop by 20%. Some saw bitcoins as a quick way to accumulate wealth, even though financial advisors said it is an investment with high volatility and should only be considered if you have high risk tol-

erance. Many investors in this unproven currency saw steep increases in wealth and then financial collapse. House prices soared for most of the year and when recession hit, the value dropped. Even when our investments are successful, we still leave everything we own to others when we die. Our name may be on the mailbox, or the gate to the ranch, or deed to the house; yet when we die, our name is removed, and another name is added.

George W. Carroll

George W. Carroll was a wealthy Texas philanthropist who gave a lot of money to Texas Baptist causes. He was president of the oil and gas company that was behind the Spindletop oil boom of 1901. During the Great Depression he lost almost everything. One day he was walking with a friend across the grounds of Southwestern Seminary, and they saw his name on a building because of a generous donation he made. The friend said, "Now that you are broke do you wish you had kept the money you gave for that building?" He answered, "Absolutely not. Everything I kept I lost, and only that which I gave away has been preserved."

Jesus said do not treasure earthly treasures but instead store treasures in Heaven. What are heavenly treasures? "Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen,

but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:16–18). The Apostle Peter wrote, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to *obtain* an inheritance *which* is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Peter 1:3–5).

When we treasure God’s Word we are investing in the eternal. As a parent invests in a child, or a pastor in a church, or a Sunday School teacher in a class, or a nurse in a patient, or a chaplain in an inmate; they are investing in eternity. If a person is founder of a business to build wealth for himself, he is investing in that which is temporal. Yet if that person builds a business that will provide jobs and offer services for others, he is investing in eternity. I can think of a sixth-grade Sunday School teacher who took a personal interest in the boys in our class and taught us to love the Bible and share our faith with our friends. I remember a Junior High English teacher who pulled me aside and challenged me to do my best. I have been blessed with grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, a wife, and children who have poured love and encouragement into me. Hundreds of church members through the ages have loved, taught, forgiven, and challenged me and our family in our walk with Christ.

Jesus did not say for us to put our treasure where our heart is. He said, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Too often we wait until we are emotionally moved before sharing

our resources in some kingdom cause. Yet Jesus claims the opposite. A pastor told of his brother who was sent to Vietnam during the conflict there. Before his brother went, the pastor had no interest in that country. He would not have been able to find it on a map. He knew nothing about the climate, the terrain, the people, their customs, or even their religious preferences. Yet when his brother was sent there, he became a student of the country. He read everything about the situation. He studied geography, because he wanted to know where his brother was and what he was experiencing. Where our treasure is, there our heart will be also.

Where Is Your Focus? (6:22–23)

My mother told us that you could understand a lot about a person by looking in their eyes. She said she could look in our eyes and tell whether or not we were telling the truth. Of course, she might observe the damage that my three brothers and I had done, or the tall tales we may have been telling, that contributed to her success for discerning the truth.

Jesus said, “The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body is full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness” (6:23–24). With our eyes we allow truth, beauty, and compassion into our minds, or we invite evil, distortions, lusts, and untruth. In 2 Corinthians 4:4, we are reminded that the god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelieving. Romans 1 reminds us of the consequences of our continued rebellion against God. “Professing to become wise, they became fools” (Romans 1:22). “God gave them over to the

lusts of their hearts to impurity” (1:24). “God gave them over to degrading passions” (1:26). “God gave them over to a depraved mind” (1:28).

Everything we allow to enter through our eyes forms our character and our relationships. What shapes our lives through the movies, social media, books, and music we regularly invite into our minds? If we focus on angry issues, we will be angry. If we fix our minds on lustful temptations, it will result in shameful actions and broken relationships. If we allow culture to determine our truth, we subject ourselves to the manipulation of marketing. If the truth we hold is untruth, how tragic is our choice for ourselves and those we influence.

The Bible teaches, “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things” (Philippians 4:8).

Who Is Your Master? (6:24)

Jesus said, “No one *can* serve two masters.” He did not say no one *should* serve two masters. He stated what should be obvious. Serving two different masters is impossible. “The word that is translated master is *kurios*, and *kurios* is the word which denotes absolute ownership. We get the meaning far better, if we translate it: No one can be a slave to two owners. To understand all that this means and implies we must remember two things about the slave in the ancient world. First, the slave in the eyes of the law was not a person but a thing. He had absolutely no rights of his own; his master could do with him absolutely as he liked. In

the eyes of the law the slave was a living tool. Second, in the ancient world a slave had literally no time which was his own. Every moment of his life belonged to his master.”²

I had the privilege of serving on a mission trip to the Amazon jungles in Northern Brazil. I met fascinating people who lived their whole lives in a very small space on the Trombetas River. By our standards, these folks were primitive even though there was much we could learn from them. The whole village had only one small motor propelled boat and the rest of their travel was by canoes, which they made themselves. One of the men described following Christ saying, “No one can stand in two canoes at the same time.” If you placed one foot in one canoe and the other in another canoe, you would quickly fall out of both.

Attempting to please God and appease culture leads to a life of futility and frustration. Jesus said, “You cannot serve God and wealth.” Some translations use a transliteration of the Greek word *mamona* and use the word mammon. “This was not the name of an idol but a designation for valuable possessions. This word enables Jesus to name the second master as though he too, were a kind of god, the opposite of the true God to whom alone the disciples should be attached.”³ Our wealth consists of all of our material possessions including our money, house, and investments. We are tempted to choose a job or vocation that offers the most money. Or buy a larger house in order to keep up with those we wish to impress. We have heard the saying, “We buy things we don’t need, with money we don’t have, to impress folks we don’t like.” The very resources needed to serve us, such as our material possessions, can very easily become our masters, demanding our time and attention.

Grateful

"Contrast the attitude of the commentator Matthew Henry (1662–1714) who, when he was robbed, returned home and wrote in his diary words to this effect: 'Lord, I thank you that I have never been robbed before; that although they took my money, they spared my life; that although they took everything, it wasn't very much; that it was I who was robbed, not I who robbed.' Matthew Henry was a man who served God *and not wealth*."⁴

Implications and Actions

Jesus used three metaphors: treasure, light, and slavery, to call His followers to unwavering loyalty to kingdom values. Each one challenges us to clarify our allegiance to Him. Is Christ the treasure we seek? Does our understanding of truth come from the light of God's Word? Is Jesus our Master?

Questions

1. When we consider where we spend our time and money, how does that clarify where our treasure is?

2. What are some tangible ways we can lay up treasures in Heaven?

3. Do we attempt to define Scripture in light of popular culture, or do we define culture in light of Scripture?

4. How can our possessions become our master?

ENDNOTES

¹ Bob George, *Born Free* booklet, a seventeen-page witnessing booklet from Bob George Ministries, Frisco, TX.

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, (Edinburgh, Scotland: The Saint Andrew Press, 1958), 251.

³ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1943), 280.

⁴ D. A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5–7*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 81. (The words in italics were added by the author for added clarity).

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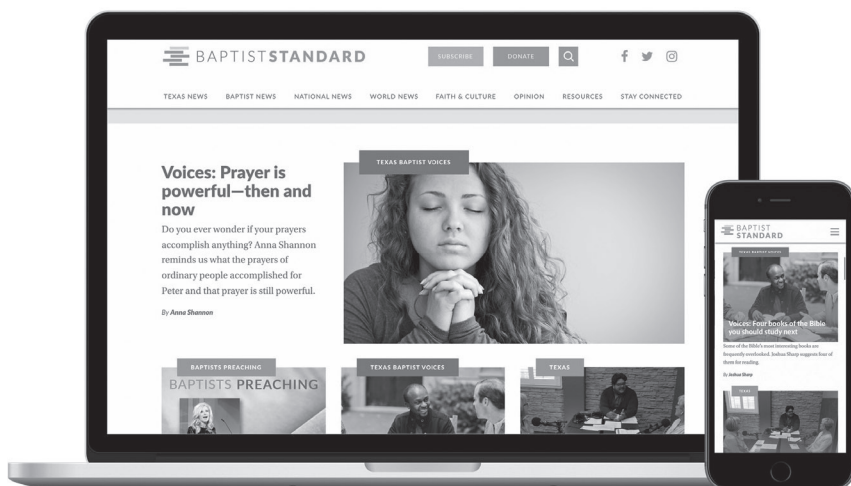
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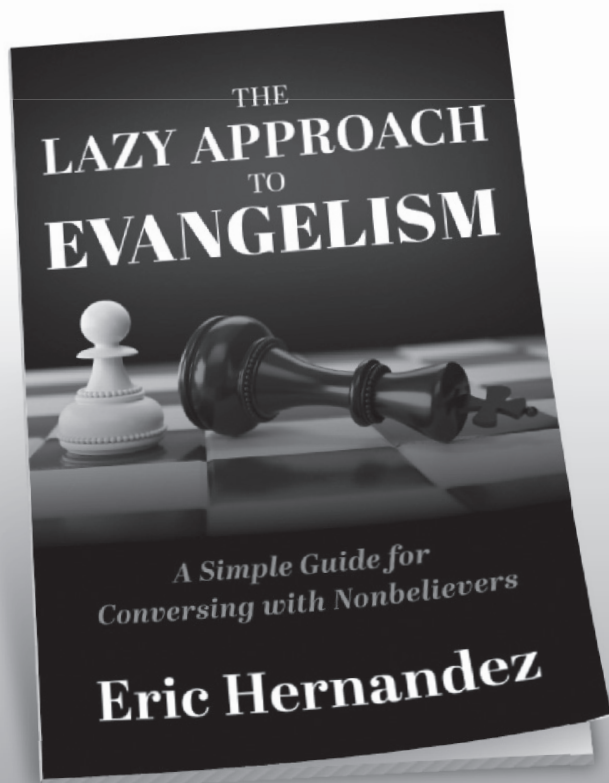


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The Lazy Approach to Evangelism: A Simple Guide for Conversing with Nonbelievers



Unfortunately, the biblical command of apologetics in evangelism is often neglected and misunderstood within our churches today. As a result, the church has become a largely irrelevant, ignorable institution within the public sphere of ideas. We must learn how to have effective gospel conversations within this culture of doubt. Evangelism doesn't have to be intimidating or difficult. That is the aim of this book. To equip you with the tools necessary for initiating and navigating fruitful conversations with nonbelievers in a secular society.

lesson 8



Trust or Anxiety?

MAIN IDEA

Worry is like a rocking chair. It keeps you occupied but won't get you anywhere. However, trusting in God's provisions frees us to experience God's plan for our lives.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

What is God's interest in me?

STUDY AIM

When we seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness, we can trust God to supply our needs.

QUICK READ

Knowing God's attentiveness to details, taking care of the birds of the air and the lilies of the fields, how much more may we trust Him with our needs?

Introduction

When Jesus taught the parable of the sower, He said, “And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful” (Matthew 13:22). In Matthew 6, Jesus also warned of the perils of earthly riches and worry. Worry affects every aspect of our lives. Marketing agents, social media, television programming, advertisers, and 24/7 news channels bombard us with life threatening illnesses, conflicts, and economic collapse. Global news brings heartaches to us from far corners of the world. How do we avoid worry? Should we ignore warnings about our health or finances? Do we become callous toward the burdens of others?

Jesus said, “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:33). When our goal in life is to live the life God has ordained for us, we will know what burdens we should bear, what causes we must champion, and grow in our understanding of the great love God has for us. In Matthew 6:25–34, we are led to ask four questions that will help us win the battle over worry.

Matthew 6:25–34

²⁵ For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to 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, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth

much more than they? ²⁷ And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life? ²⁸ And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, ²⁹ yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith! ³¹ Do not worry then, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear for clothing?" ³² For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³ But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. ³⁴ So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

What Is Important in Life?

Many folks around the world wonder whether they will have food for that day or clothing to protect them from the elements of cold, hot, or harsh climate. A majority of the people listening to Jesus teach knew the challenges of securing daily provisions. Jesus was not calling them out for genuine concerns but was assuring them of God's great compassion for them.

How much of our thoughts are centered around issues for which we have little control? Certainly, we should be disciplined in our care for ourselves and others, whether it is personal care or concern for the planet. We must hear the cries of our persecuted brothers and sisters and intercede and advocate for them. In Mi-

cah 6:8 we are called to stand up against the injustice faced by the vulnerable. Yet often our worries actually destroy our health and break our relationships. Jesus told us to stop being worried. He used the illustration of God's care for birds to remind us that He knows our need for food and the image of the lilies of the field to encourage us that He will provide our clothing.

We lived on a deep creek that flowed from the James River in Newport News, Virginia. We had a deck that overlooked the water where we watched many of God's beautiful creatures. I never tired of seeing the Osprey flying forty feet above the water, falling out of the sky, and grabbing a small fish with its feet. We saw mother ducks being followed by several of her babies, cats and kittens, rabbits, deer, and many of God's other creatures. These times of reflection reminded me that God is the Creator and has a plan for nature including the plants, animals, and the chief of His creation, humanity. Jesus said if God feeds the birds of the air or clothes the lilies of the field, how much more will He do for us.

I have visited refugee camps housing thousands of impoverished people. I have interviewed folks facing horrendous persecution and heard stories of grief from their loved ones. We have been to places scorched by drought and ravaged by storms and heard the stories of parents whose children have been kidnapped by militants. Their stories must become our stories and their cause our cause (Hebrews 13:3). Yet I have also heard them speak of God's miracles and His presence in powerful ways. I have learned how many with so little have more contentment with what they have than many of us who live so extravagantly. Instead of worrying about getting a new pair of designer jeans, perhaps we might ask God how we can share our plenty with those in need.

How Much Control Do We Have Over Our Life Span?

We can certainly shorten our lives with bad habits or foolish actions. We shouldn't tempt God with our bad decisions. Yet how many of us worry about our lifespan? The Psalmist reminds us, "Your eyes have seen my unformed substance; and in Your book were all written the days that were ordained *for me*, when as yet there was not one of them" (139:16). Jesus said, "And who of you by being worried can add a *single* hour to his life?" (6:27).

I haven't forgotten my friend Oscar Thompson, a professor at Southwestern Seminary. I was the pastor of his adult sisters and his elderly parents in Gonzales, Texas. I'll not forget the night after prayer meeting when I received the word that Oscar was diagnosed with inoperable cancer. I cried and prayed throughout the night asking God to heal my friend who was so young and such a powerful influence for the kingdom. His death didn't come immediately; he lived about five more years. Even though Oscar's impact was incredible as a professor of evangelism and a powerful preacher, God may have used him during those five years more than throughout his previous career. God gave him incredible peace and even joy. He was invited to speak on national television and university campuses to describe the source of his joy while dealing with such a devastating diagnosis. On several occasions I heard Oscar paraphrase a quote from *Pilgrim's Progress*, saying, "I've been to the bottom and it's solid." His life was built upon the Rock (Psalm 18:2).

A few weeks before his death, I was sitting with him when he was in the hospital, and I asked him to be honest with me and tell

me how he really felt. He said, “I can’t lose. If I live; I have more time with my wife and daughter. If I die, I’m in the presence of the Lord. I can’t lose.” A few days later he was in the presence of the Lord. Yet, I have never forgotten him. He is like Abel, “and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks” (Hebrews 11:4).

What Is God’s Interest in Us?

Jesus reminded us that worry is a failure to trust God. In 6:32, He taught us that to be anxious about God’s provisions is to live like pagans (Gentiles).

The Psalmist David asked, “What is man that You take thought of him, and the son of man that You care for him?” (Psalm 8:4). When Jesus assured His listeners of God’s care for the birds, He then added, “Are you not worth much more than they?” (6:26). After His illustration of the lilies, He responded, “Will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith” (30)! Jesus challenged us to “seek first His kingdom and His righteousness,” and followed with the promise, “and all these things will be added to you” (33).

When Jesus taught us to pray, He gave us the privilege of addressing God as our Father (6:9). In Matthew 25, we learn of God’s immutable purposes of His cross, death, resurrection, ascension, return, and judgment. In the great blessing of Ephesians 3:20–21, we read, “Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.” We can be assured of God’s love for us; “In this is love, not that we loved

God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation of our sins” (1 John 4:10).

In Romans 8:32, “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?” Why should we allow worry to rob us of life, miss out on kingdom opportunities and shatter meaningful relationships when God promises to provide what we need?

What Is Our Number One Priority?

Jesus taught us that we are to seek His kingdom and His righteousness as our number one priority in life. He promised in the Beatitudes, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” (5:6).

I have recently been watching the historical drama television series, “The Chosen,” created and directed by Dallas Jenkins. The early episodes reminded me of how unorthodox Jesus’ approach was. Why did He reach out to a demon possessed woman, Mary Magdalene, who became the first person to witness His Resurrection? Why did He call common rugged fishermen to be His disciples instead of the rabbis who dedicated their lives to the study and practice of Scripture? Why was His first public miracle turning water into wine at a wedding? Why did sinners flock to Him while respectable folks, even religious leaders, largely resist Him? These scenes made me begin to wonder where God may be working today.

Duration

"In verse 27, the Greek word 'pechys,' which is sometimes translated 'hour,' is really a measurement of 18 inches. It is a measurement of space not time. The Greek word behind the translation 'life' in this verse is 'helikia,' which can mean age, stature, or duration of life. If we take 'pechys' to mean 'a cubit or 18 inches' and 'helikia' to mean 'stature,' Jesus would be saying that a person cannot through over-anxiety increase his or her height by 18 inches. Yet who is going to be overly concerned about adding this huge amount of growth unless the person wishes to be a basketball player. It seems better to take 'helikia' to mean duration of life or age. But what are we to do about 'pechys,' which is a spatial not a temporal measurement? In Psalm 39:5 a space measurement is used as a temporal standard, 'You have made my days a mere handbreadth.' The handbreadth was a measure of about three inches. Thus Jesus is saying the corroding care cannot lengthen life. On the contrary, the pressures of life might contribute to shortening life."¹

Philip Yancey wrote, "The American dream is to reach a point where you don't have to do anything you don't want to do and can do everything that you do want to do. The Beatitudes express quite plainly that God views this world through a different set of lenses." He continues, "Various scenes in the Gospels give a good picture of the kind of people who impressed Jesus. A widow who gave her last two cents in the offering. A dishonest tax collector so riddled with anxiety that he climbed a tree to get a better view

of Jesus. A nameless, nondescript child. A woman with a string of five unhappy marriages. A blind beggar. An adulteress. A man with leprosy. Strength, good looks, connections, and the competitive instinct may bring a person success in a society like ours, but those very qualities may block entrance to the kingdom of heaven. Dependence, sorrow, repentance, a longing to change—these are the gates to God’s kingdom.”²

Perhaps the desperate in countries like Iran and China, where the church continues to grow in spite of increased religious persecution, who have no other place to turn, are turning to the One who offers them deliverance.

Intimacy With God

Dr. John Killinger suggests four habits that will help us achieve intimacy with God. 1. **Get to know God’s story.** 2. **Spend time with God.** You cannot have intimacy with someone you don’t spend time with. 3. **Seek to please God.** Do something that gives another person pleasure. 4. **Reflect what your life is becoming with God.** How is being related to God changing your life?³

Implications and Actions

Our actions will help us to answer the question of whether we live a life of trust or one of anxiety? What keeps us awake at night? Do we hunger and thirst for righteousness, or do we worry and eagerly seek temporal goals? Is our primary goal in life to seek

Christ and attempt to be where He is working, or are we driven by a passion to please others and gain earthly applause? Spend time for a personal inventory of your time and activities and see how your actions can align with God's plan for your life.

Questions

1. What do you value most in life?
2. How can you be assured of God's provisions for you?
3. How can we find the right balance for caring for ourselves and our families physical needs while not allowing temporal concerns to dominate us?

4. Is there a constant source of worry that is harming you personally as well as having a negative impact on others? If so, what can you do to overcome it?

ENDNOTES

¹ T. C. Smith, *The Sermon on the Mount*, (Greenville, SC: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1992), 91–92.

² Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 114.

³ John Killinger, *Preaching Magazine*, November/December 1990, pages 2 and following.

lesson 9



Before You Judge

MAIN IDEA

Knowing the right thing to do is not difficult. Treating others the way you wish to be treated is the challenge.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

What personal trait in my life might be a stumbling block to others?

STUDY AIM

We must examine our own lives before we are critical of others.

QUICK READ

It is hypocritical to be harsh in assessing others while neglecting unhealthy behavior in our own lives.

Introduction

Jesus painted a humorous picture when He asked why a person with a log in his own eye, is concerned about the situation of another who has a speck in his eye. “One of the best commentaries on this thought is a ‘Peanuts’ cartoon. Little Linus, looking forlorn and weary asks Lucy, ‘Why are you always so anxious to criticize me?’ Lucy, with all the confidence her self-righteous mood could muster responds, ‘I just think I have a knack for seeing other people’s faults.’ Linus indignantly snaps, ‘What about your own faults?’ Lucy responds, ‘I have a knack for overlooking them.’”¹

Matthew 7:1–6, 12

¹ Do not judge so that you will not be judged. ² For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. ³ Why do you look at 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,” and behold, the log is in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the log out your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye. ⁶ Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.

¹² In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

Do Not Be Too Quick to Judge Others (7:1–5)

Profiling has become a key word in our society as we seek to understand unjust judgments against others because of their looks, status, ethnicity, speech, or other distinguishing traits. We were living in Northern Virginia on 9/11. Terrorism took on new meaning and near our Nation's Capital, it appeared especially frightening. We all became vigilant, looking at others as potential enemies, security was heightened in travel hubs like airline or train terminals. Many law-abiding immigrants suddenly felt under the scrutiny of others.

A few days after the attacks, I took our car to be serviced. The manager called for José, one of the workers to come help me. After calling his name several times, finally a man came reluctantly to the front wearing an oil-stained jump suit bearing the name Osama. The man with the unfortunate name of Osama probably forgot that his new name was José; and he had not had time to change the name on his uniform to reflect his new identity. The name Osama was an unfortunate name for anyone living in D.C. after 9/11. Even though this was a humorous episode for me, it must have been tragic for a dark-skinned immigrant with the same name as the world's most notorious terrorist.

Jesus warned His disciples against judging others. This was not a statement against confronting corruption and injustice. Jesus clearly addressed the hypocrisy of the religious leaders in Matthew 23, calling out the "8 woes." There are many biblical examples where judgment is pronounced against injustice. Nathan confronted King David for his sins of adultery and murder (2 Samuel 12). John the Baptist was put in prison and ultimately

executed because he opposed Herod the tetrarch for all the wicked things he had done (Luke 3:18-20).

The Greek word used for “judge” is *krinete*. The English word critic is derived from this word. Jesus warned against unjust criticism of others by using the exaggerated imagery of a person totally oblivious to a log in his own eye while condemning a person with a speck in his eye. Speck refers to a splinter or small piece of dried wood while a log is a plank on which a house is built. Jesus applied the obvious advice, “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” (7:5).

Judging others is one of the most damaging sins that is too often tolerated and perhaps encouraged by the church. Even children are tempted to bully or ridicule others because of their differences. Prayer meetings can quickly turn into rumor mills and even into character assassinations. Concerns become suspicions, then suspicions are repeated as facts. Judgment is passed from person to person or by public forums through print, social media, even pulpits and classrooms. Whether judgment is proclaimed through graffiti or pseudo concerns that begin with, “I think you should know...,” Jesus condemns the hypocrisy of judging others while tolerating our own sins.

Before we judge, ask three questions: Do you know the whole truth? Can you be impartial? Is judgment your call?

When we judge others, Jesus said we will be judged by our own standard of measurement. Our criticism of others is often directed against the sin we see in our own lives. A dishonest person is one who is always on guard against others treating him or

her dishonestly. Criticism of others gives a person a false sense of virtue to mask the sin he tolerates in his own life.

Learn From the Example of David **(2 Samuel 11:26–12:7)**

The prophet Nathan told King David a story about a rich man with multiple flocks and herds, who entertained a guest and rather than killing one of his own sheep, took, killed, and served the poor man's only ewe lamb that was like a child to him. King David who had a reputation as a righteous man, was furious and cried out, "As the Lord lives, surely the man who has done this deserves to die" (2 Samuel 12:5). Nathan said, "You are the man" (12:7)! David committed lust, adultery, and murder; yet he was totally oblivious to his own sin while furious about another man who hypothetically killed a lamb. David wanted to take the speck out of another's eye while he had a log in his own eye.

In John 8:1–11, Jesus was teaching in the Temple when some of the religious leaders brought a woman caught in adultery to Him. "Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do you say?" Jesus wrote something on the ground with His finger and then looked up and said, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first one to throw a stone at her." They began to walk away one at a time.

Jesus asked the woman, "Where are they? Did no one condemn you? I do not condemn you either, from now on sin no more."²

You Reap What You Sow

"One who lies reacts most violently when he is lied to; one who deceives, when he is deceived; one who is dishonest, when he is treated dishonestly; one who hates, when he is hated. The opposite is also true. No one reacts more tenderly to love than one who loves; to kindness than one who is kind; to humility than one who is humble; to forgiveness than one who forgives. It is just the plain truth that 'with what judgment you judge you shall be judged.' You determine your own punishment or reward. You reap what you sow. Paul puts it this way: 'Now listen here, man—and that includes every preacher—you have nothing to hide behind. For whatever you preach to somebody else, you're laying it on yourself, because you, the preacher, are guilty of the very same things'" (Romans 2:1, Cotton Patch Version).³

Only God knows what Jesus wrote on the ground, but one thing is certain, He knew the hearts of the religious leaders. While they pretended to be concerned for the Law, they believed their own sins were hidden. By the way, where was the man who must have been as guilty as she?

Jesus did not overlook what the woman did. He acknowledged her unlawful act and commanded her to sin no more.

Do Not Cast Pearls Before Swine (7:6)

Dogs and Swine

Jesus' reference to the dogs and swine in verse 6 appears to have no connection with His statement about judging others. Yet perhaps it does. "To the Jews dogs and hogs acted as scavengers, and no Jew was allowed to possess swine. The parallelism of the statement shows that one type of men is referred to, not two. These cannot be the Gentiles as such although the Jews called them dogs. Nor can this giving to the dogs refer to the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles or to publicans and sinners; for this Jesus Himself did and commands His disciples to do. Dogs and swine are those who, after the gospel has been duly preached to them, retain their vicious, filthy nature. All such the disciples are, indeed, to judge and account as what they are."⁴

Some interpreters believe Matthew 7 is like a quilt, with unrelated topics connected to other ideas. Verse 6 is one of those thoughts that appears to have little in common with Jesus' command not to judge and the next section dealing with prayer. This is a difficult saying that some may have used to justify the gospel was only for the Jews or others may have construed that the church should isolate herself from the stain of the world. The church has faced opposition from a hostile world, exposed by the light of Christ, as well as the potential of destruction from within through heresy. This statement cannot be used by the church to withdraw from

the world, because Jesus has already spoken that a light should not be hidden under a basket.

Live by the Golden Rule (7:12)

A friend of mine said he had become the two things his father hated the most: an attorney and a football official. I guess both are subjects of jokes and criticism because they have been given the task of interpreting laws (or rules). Many of us are tempted to believe we know more about what is happening in a ballgame while we sit in front of our television or watch from the bleachers than the officials on the field. We must admit it is amusing, at some point in every college or NFL football game a dispute will occur over whether a receiver made a legal catch of the football or not. I recently heard sage advice from someone who said, “Ask a ten-year-old, ‘Did the receiver catch the ball or not?’” What may not be obvious to replay analysis may be clear to a child.

Religious leaders created a whole religious class of scribes and teachers who developed a complicated system of hundreds of prohibitions defining God’s laws. In verse 12, Jesus simplifies the Law and the Prophets. “Treat people the way you want them to treat you.” Doing the right thing isn’t too difficult to understand. Do you want someone to steal your wife? Do not steal his. Do you want someone to spread rumors about you or your family? Don’t spread rumors about them. Would you want an employer or employee to lie to you? Do not lie to them. Do you want someone to steal from you, laugh at you, ridicule you, talk about you behind your back, or strike you?

Actually, Jesus didn't state this truth in the negative. He didn't say, "Don't do to others what you don't want them to do for you." He made a positive statement. "Treat others the way you want them to treat you." To make a friend; be a friend.

Implications and Actions

The Greeks and Romans of Jesus' day were notorious sinners, affirming blatant immorality, corrupt governments, and unbridled greed. Jesus never condoned these acts of lawlessness; however, His most harsh criticism was toward the religious leaders who appeared to follow the Law yet in truth were just as proud and greedy as their oppressors. What would Jesus' message be today? Would He spend most of His time condemning the culture, or would He confront the sins of the church?

God responded to the prayer of Solomon saying, "And My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14). God did not call out the pagans; He called out His people. If we surveyed the unchurched people in our culture and asked if the church spent more time judging culture or genuine personal repentance, what would their response be? If we do want genuine revival, we must spend more time in humility, brokenness, and repentance, getting the log out of our own eye; and then we may see more clearly how to help the unchurched.

Questions

1. If I stood before Jesus and asked Him to describe the log in my own eye, what would He say to me?
2. How do we find the balance for calling out injustice in our society with what Jesus said about judging?
3. What attitudes in our church may be stumbling blocks to others?
4. What positive actions are we taking as a congregation that shows our community, we care about them?

5. How can I communicate my gratitude to God for the great grace He gives to me?

ENDNOTES

¹ Johnny F. McKinney, "Giving Up Our Judgeship," *The Sermon on the Mount*, Scott Nash, editor, (Greenville, SC: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1992), 164.

² Condensed and paraphrased from John 8:1–11.

³ Clarence Jordan, *Sermon on the Mount, Revised Edition*, (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1989), 103–104.

⁴ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1964), 291.

lesson 10



Prayer Power

MAIN IDEA

God answers our prayers as a wise loving father responds to the requests of his children.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

If I had only one request of God, what would it be?

STUDY AIM

Pray for God's kingdom plan for our lives to be manifested in us.

QUICK READ

God continues to give what is good to those who continue to ask.

Introduction

Jesus boldly promises that if we ask, we will receive. Does that mean if a person who is five feet eight inches tall with little to no athletic abilities, asks for God to make him an NBA basketball player that God will grant his request? I assume God would spare him the humiliation and painful experience by not granting that request.

This incredible promise comes after Jesus had been teaching His followers what it means to be a kingdom citizen. Should we ask for wealth? Jesus already taught the folly of laying up earthly riches. Should we ask for fame? Jesus said, if our goal is to be noticed by men (6:1), we have no reward from our Father who is in Heaven. This promise is not a wish list for those seeking temporal benefits; Jesus spoke of blessings far greater than temporary earthly treasures. If we ask for a gentle spirit, He said, we will inherit the earth. When we hunger and thirst for righteousness, we will be satisfied. If we seek a pure heart, we will see God. God calls us to be light in a world of darkness. He spoke of genuine righteousness that is greater than even that practiced by the scribes and Pharisees.

Matthew 7:7–11

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 he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. ⁹ Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? ¹¹ If you then,

being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!

You Have Not, Because You Ask Not (7:7)

Why do we see such little evidence of God's power in our lives? God did miraculous things among the first-generation church. Luke tracks the growth of the church in the early chapters of the book of Acts. In Acts 2:47, "The Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved." In Acts 4:4, we read that the church now included about five thousand. In the next chapter (5:14), we are told that multitudes of men and women were being added to the church. "The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith" (6:7).

Jesus said, "we have not because we ask not." These seven words of Jesus remind us why we see so little of God's power. We are reminded again in James 4:2–3, "You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures." God's power was evident in the early church because they were people who prayed genuinely and faithfully. "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). As the church grew, and the ministry to the widows became overwhelming for the apostles, they chose seven servant leaders to be sure the needs of the widows were not overlooked. But the disciples

continued to devote themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word (Acts 6:4).

God still works through His church and often most clearly in places where it is dangerous to be a follower of Christ, such as in Iran and China, where the power of God is being displayed and the church is growing as it did in its early days.

Their Faith Was Too Small

"It was a source of constant amazement to Jesus that men drank so sparingly from so great a reservoir. They were too timid around God. The Father had prepared so bountifully and sumptuously for his children, and they were too bashful to eat and drink. They starved themselves needlessly. They believed too little. Their faith was too small. If it had been only as large as a mustard seed, their faith could have generated enough power to move mountains. He wondered why men held God back so, why they were so unbelieving, why they hindered God from doing the many mighty works he stood ready to do."¹

Yet an honest assessment of too many of the churches in the West today, reminds us of our lack of evidence of God's power; where we find ignorance of God's Word, prayerlessness, disunity, prejudice, pride, immorality of all kinds, filthy language, dishonesty, greed, corruption, and jealousy. Preachers are tempted to speak against the sins of the culture, while ignoring the transgressions of the church. Some congregations try to appease contemporary customs by calling what is wrong good, and desire to

make folks feel comfortable even while they continue to rebel against God's design for their lives.

However, God may not be through with us yet. God promised Solomon at the dedication of the Temple, "My eyes will be open and My ears attentive to the prayer *offered* in this place" (2 Chronicles 7:15). A genuine encounter with God through worship and prayer, brings brokenness, confession, repentance, and genuine desire for God's kingdom to come, His will be done, on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10). God is eagerly waiting for us to pray.

When You Pray, You Will Receive (7:8)

The disciples wanted to learn how to pray like Jesus prayed. In Luke's account of this same prayer promise (Luke 11:9–13), it follows a request from His disciples, "Lord teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples" (11:1). We never hear the disciples asking Jesus how to preach or teach or even to heal; yet they wanted to know how to pray like He prayed. Jesus began by teaching them the model prayer and continued with a parable about a desperate friend seeking bread at midnight. He began the model prayer by giving them permission to call God Father, just as He always did.

Jesus' parable of the friend asking for bread at midnight is often interpreted as a call to persistent prayer. In Luke 11:8, the sleeping friend agrees to give him bread, not because he is his friend, but because of his persistence, bothering him and awakening his family. He gets up and gives him whatever he wants just to get rid of him. Is Jesus saying if we bother God with our continuous prayers, He will reluctantly answer? Of course not. This is a parable of **contrast**, rather than a parable of **comparison**. God

is not like a grumpy friend who gets up and gives bread because He is annoyed or bothered; God is like a father who gives good gifts to His son.

God is eager to respond to our prayers. Jesus encouraged us to keep on asking, keep on seeking, and keep on knocking. The three imperatives: ask, seek, and knock, are in the present tense indicating continuous action. Keep on asking and you will keep on receiving; keep seeking and you will continue to find; keep knocking and the door will continually be opened.

The Bible records stories from each generation where God's people called out to Him and He answered. When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, they begged God for freedom (Exodus 1–4), and God raised up Moses and delivered them. During the time when Eli was a judge in Israel, Hannah, the wife of Elkanah, was barren. She cried to God and asked for a child and God gave her a son. She named him Samuel saying, "Because I have asked him of the Lord" (1 Samuel 1:20). When God told Gideon to lead His people against the powerful Midianites, Gideon asked for assurance and God gave him a sign (Judges 6). Solomon was made king over Israel, and he asked God for wisdom and God said, "Behold, I have given you a wise and discerning heart, so that there has been no one like you before you, nor shall one like you arise after you" (1 Kings 3:12).

David called on God for forgiveness in Psalm 51. Elisha prayed for a double portion of Elijah's spirit when Elijah was taken up into Heaven (2 Kings 2:9). Peter was in prison and the church prayed for him to be released and God set him free (Acts 12). God wants us to ask. He has plans for us greater than we can imagine.

Isaiah 55:6 says, “Seek the Lord while He may be found; call on Him while He is near.”

But what about those times when God appears to ignore our cries. If God released Peter from prison, why doesn’t He free the Chinese pastor John Cao who has served four years of an unjust seven-year sentence although we have prayed for God to release him? God healed the blind, deaf, lame, lepers, and even raised the dead; yet some may ask why He has not healed your child, or spouse or even your own infirmities. God raised Lazarus from the dead, yet he and all of that generation ultimately died. Church history reminds us that all of the disciples faced persecution and perhaps all of them except possibly John died a violent death.

We must not forget what Jesus taught us in the model prayer. “Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven” (Matthew 6:10). God is our heavenly Father. His love for us is greater than our understanding or even imagination. His only begotten Son also died a cruel death, because it was part of His purpose. God’s perspective is eternal; and we can trust Him to answer, “yes,” or “no.” God’s timing may be now or later. “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28).

Our Confidence Is Based on God’s Character (7:9–11)

If a child asks his parent for bread, will he give him a stone? If he asks for fish, will he give him a snake? Of course not. What

a ridiculous thought. Jesus painted the preposterous picture to remind us that we can trust our heavenly Father.

Small Gentle Voice

“‘Why should I spend an hour in prayer when I do nothing during that time but think about people I am angry with, people who are angry with me, books I should read and books I should write, and thousands of other silly things that happen to grab my mind for a moment?’ Henri Nouwen posed that question in different forms, toying with different answers. Sometimes he fell back on the need for spiritual discipline, for being faithful even with no apparent reward: ‘We must pray not first of all because it feels good or helps, but because God loves us and wants our attention.’

“In the end, Nouwen concluded that ‘sitting in the presence of God for one hour each morning—day after day, week after week, and month after month, in total confusion and with a myriad of distractions—radically changes my life.’ He learned humility and dependence, and after hours of persistent prayer with no obvious sign of fruitfulness, he realized that a small, gentle voice had indeed been speaking all the while.”²

As we reflect on the character of God, we know we can trust Him. God is the Creator of all things. “All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men” (John 1:3–4). God is holy. Jesus taught us to pray, “Hal-

lowed be your name” (Matthew 6:9). When God appeared to Moses, it was a holy moment. “Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Exodus 3:5). Jesus is the vine; the Father is the vinedresser; we are the branches (John 15:1–8). Both Jesus and the Holy Spirit *intercede* for us (Romans 8:26–27, 34). Space is not sufficient to recount all of the other aspects of God’s character. He is love, merciful, our refuge and strength, our rock, our sun and our shield, our shepherd, our teacher. Jesus is the bridegroom, and the Church is His bride.

“If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him” (Matthew 7:11)!

Implications and Actions

As Jesus taught the disciples, He knew the challenges that both He and His followers would face. They would be tempted by large responsive crowds and also jeered by those who wished to kill them. They would be comforted by God’s miracles and during other times experience loneliness of nights in dark prisons, wondering if anyone, even God, was aware of their circumstances. Even Jesus cried out on the cross, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me” (Matthew 27:46).

Jesus was telling His disciples in advance, whatever happens, keep on asking, keep on seeking, and keep on knocking. And God will keep on answering in His own time and His own way.

Questions

1. What are you asking of God that only God can supply?
2. Are you struggling with a situation where you need God to help you pray, “Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven?”
3. Is there one aspect of the character of God, that you will seek to understand more fully in your Bible study and prayer time during the next several weeks?
4. Can you identify a situation where God may use you to be the answer to a prayer of a brother or sister?

ENDNOTES

¹ Clarence Jordan, *Sermon on the Mount, Revised Edition*, (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1989), 110.

² Philip Yancey, *Prayer: Does it make any difference?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 153.

lesson 11



The Path That Leads to Life

MAIN IDEA

The life Jesus described in the Sermon on the Mount doesn't happen automatically. It requires a decision.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

When have I ever made a deliberate decision to reject being swept along by the crowd and have chosen to follow Christ?

STUDY AIM

We must recognize that true freedom and life come from the abundant life found only in Christ.

QUICK READ

The path one chooses is a matter of life and death resulting in opposing destinies.

Introduction

Dr. John Newport, distinguished professor of religion at Southwestern Seminary, was described by one of his colleagues, Dr. Curtis Vaughan, who was a distinguished professor of New Testament at Southwestern, as “one of the most remarkable persons I have ever known. He had a vast range of knowledge and moved comfortably among intellectual giants. Yet the thing that impressed me most about John was his childlike faith and his warm devotion to Christ.”

Dr. Newport had numerous earned degrees, in addition to teaching at Southwestern, he also taught at Princeton, Baylor, and was the Chair of the Religious Studies at Rice University. He wrote eleven books, including, *Life's Ultimate Questions*, a book I believe should be required reading for every seminary student.

While my wife and I were students at Southwestern, Newport was one of our favorite professors. About fifteen years after leaving the school I returned to Fort Worth as pastor of University Baptist Church. On one special occasion, I was privileged to spend most of a day with Dr. Newport when we officiated a funeral together. The memorial service was in Dallas and the burial in Fort Worth, so I had time alone with him while we traveled. I reveled at the opportunity. On our return from Dallas, I asked, “Dr. Newport you have studied at prestigious schools, had conversations with global scholars, written academic theological books; what is the most profound discovery you have made about life?” After reflecting on the question, he answered, “My mama was right. The straight and narrow path leads to life.”

He continued by telling me that this biblical truth his mother shared with him when he was young seemed awfully restricting and burdensome. However, he said after following that truth his whole life, he realized she was right. She told him to avoid alcohol, smoking, immorality; to follow Christ, stay committed to church and faithful to his wife when he married. As a result, he said he never had to worry about some of the illnesses or accidents associated with the actions that in her own eyes were destructive, which resulted in a wonderful life and family that brought him great opportunities and experiences. He repeated, “Yes, the straight and narrow path leads to life.”

Dr. Newport’s mom shared a theme repeated throughout the Bible including Jeremiah 21:8, “Behold, I set before you the way of life and the way of death.” Jesus told His followers to enter through the narrow gate.

Matthew 7:13–14

¹³ Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. ¹⁴ For the gate is small and the way narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

The Demands of the Sermon

Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” (Matthew 6:24). As He began to draw the Sermon to a conclusion, He re-

peated this argument with the illustrations of the two gates, two trees, and two foundations. These “either/or” statements remind us there are only two choices: follow Christ and find life or fail to follow Christ and experience destruction.

The narrow gate leading to the small path is not the most obvious choice. This is the path of those who ask, seek, and knock; individuals who acknowledge life’s most urgent questions; those who will dare contemplate origins, destinations, and purpose of life. An individual doesn’t just find himself or herself on the narrow road, Jesus said it requires a choice and an action, “Enter through the narrow gate.” The word translated *enter* is an aorist imperative verb in the Greek text, indicating a point in time and a command.

The narrow path is not the easiest of the two, requiring a righteousness that is even greater than that of the law-abiding Pharisees. The ones traveling this road are those who are called to resist anger and lust and even those who love their enemies as well as their friends. They must deal with their own sins before attempting to help others with their sins; and who seek to treat others as they wish to be treated.

Some have said the safest place to be is in the will of God. That is not what Jesus said. He reminds us that the narrow path is costly. Jesus brings comfort to the grieving and strength to the persecuted. The security and popularity of Christianity in the West has lured many into a false assurance with expectations of earthly rewards for living moral lives including occasional acts of charity. The cross, a symbol of our faith, has become decorative jewelry and the label Christian might easily be exploited for marketing purposes. Yet in many communities around the world,

even a name that indicates a Christian heritage may result in children being forbidden from schools; or marking them as targets for kidnapping. Some of our trusted Nigerian friends indicate as many as 25,000 children have been kidnapped in 2022 in Northern Nigeria by radical Islamist terrorists. In the Nineveh Plains in Iraq, houses marked with Christian symbols became targets for Isis as they expelled all Christians and other religious minorities from their homes and threatened them with death. Only God knows how many Christians have recently been martyred or currently are in prison for their faith.

The narrow path is not the safest; nor is it the most popular. Jesus said that only a few find it. American Christianity has been recently concerned about the number of people who identify with no religious identity, nones. While this is alarming, we must be careful how we respond. Some believe we need to present the gospel in a more tolerant or entertaining way to make it more appealing to nonbelievers. However, the longer Jesus preached, the more folks turned away from Him. The sixth chapter of John begins with Jesus feeding the thousands, yet by the end of the chapter we find that “many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore. So Jesus said to the twelve, ‘You do not want to go away also, do you?’ Simon Peter answered Him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God’” (John 6:66–69). While we should not use this as an excuse for failing to emphasize authentic evangelism; we must not be surprised that many will reject the small gate and settle for the wide road.

The Two Paths

"The two paths are not ends in themselves, but have eternal significance beyond themselves. The one ends in destruction, the other in life. Ironically, it is the spacious and popular path which leads to destruction, and the confined and relatively unpopular one which leads to life. The point remains the same in each case; not the path but the path's destination is of ultimate significance. The tragedy is that otherwise reasonable men become so enamored with the spaciousness and the popularity of their path that they take little thought as to its destination.

"Men will not gain the kingdom by worshipping nature, nor by pious sentiment, nor by drifting into salvation without decision and commitment, still less by hedonism and self-expression. They will enter life by coming under the kingdom norms, and be saved by God's grace through faith in Christ, or they will head for destruction. On this point Jesus insists."¹

The broad way is often the traditional path of the status quo, the way that is socially acceptable. Too often the church will conform to the ethics of culture rather than choose to conform to the demands of discipleship. The religious leaders appeared to be the first to reject Jesus because He was a threat to their social standing. Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven *will enter*. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name

cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you, depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness’” (Matthew 7:21–23).

The Decision of the Hearer

Jesus told us that a decision must be made to enter into the way that leads to life. In Romans 5:16–19, we are reminded that we are all born into sin, but we must choose to receive the grace and gift of righteousness through Jesus Christ. “So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of One the many will be made righteous” (Romans 5:18–19). Romans 3:23 states, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Because of our sinful nature and our choice to sin, we must make a decision to step away from the broad path and enter through the narrow gate. A person may fall in love, but she must make a decision to get married. Jesus gave the command for us to enter through the narrow gate.

A rich young ruler came to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life” (Matthew 19:16)? The young man followed the traditional theology of his day that salvation comes to those who make a habit of keeping the law. Yet the very thing that brought him recognition and security was keeping him from the true righteousness of Christ, his wealth. Jesus said, “If you wish to be complete, go *and* sell your possessions and give it to *the* poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” (19:21). Jesus asked too much of

him and he went away grieving. “And Jesus said to His disciples, ‘Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God’” (19:23–24).

The gate that leads to life is too small for us to bring our baggage. There is no room for us to bring our good works, our acts of righteousness, our fears, our burdens, our guilt, and our self-doubt. “If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9).

The Consequences of the Choice

The two journeys go in opposite directions. At the point of changing direction, the distance is not too great. But the further we go along the new path, the greater the distance becomes. The longer a person travels the broad road, the more he experiences destruction. The wide path is strewn with broken relationships, false promises, hardness of heart, loneliness, anger, fear, missed opportunities, and hopelessness. Even though the narrow way may include physical challenges and even public rejection, it leads to a life of love, joy, peace, and hope. Jesus said, “These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full” (John 15:11).

Implications and Actions

Joshua knew his death was near. God had given him an incredible life as a close associate to Moses and then as the leader who successfully led the children of Israel into the Promised Land. He saw God work in miraculous ways and at times witnessed bold actions of obedience from God's chosen while also seeing how quickly the children of Israel rebelled against God. In his final admonition to Israel he said, "Now, therefore, fear the Lord and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:14–15).

Years later, when God's people had become idolators and rebellious, the prophet Elijah, stood before the king, the false prophets, and all of the people and said, "How long *will* you hesitate between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow Him.' But the people did not answer him a word" (1 Kings 18:21).

Jesus posed a similar contrast with the disciples and the multitudes. Will you enter the narrow gate, or will you follow the broad road that leads to destruction? All eternity hinges on this question! Which road have you chosen?

Questions

1. Have you made a decision to enter through the narrow gate?
2. Why did Jesus describe the broad gate as the path of destruction?
3. Why did He call the small gate and narrow path the way to life?
4. What are some of the challenges contemporary followers of Christ are facing today?

5. How can we stand with those who are suffering for their faith?

ENDNOTES

¹ D. A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5–7* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978), 125–126.

lesson 12



Don't Be Fooled

MAIN IDEA

Avoid those who speak for the Lord yet live lives contrary to God's message.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

How does my life reveal the authenticity of His message?

STUDY AIM

Are our lives a reflection of the fruit of the Spirit or the fruit of the flesh?

QUICK READ

Do not be fooled by false prophets whose way leads to destruction.

Introduction

Marvin and Linda attended a church where I was previously pastor. They were faithful in attendance on Sunday mornings and evenings. Marvin was concerned about his wife, believing she was lost because she was a Catholic and he was a Baptist. He prayed for her faithfully and spoke to me about his concerns. One Sunday evening following the worship service, Marvin approached me weeping and with a broken spirit. He said, "Pastor I realized tonight that I am lost. I have been religious but have never had a genuine personal experience with Christ." After a brief conversation we both knelt down, and Marvin repented and gave his heart to Christ. When we stood up, he was overcome with gratitude.

About an hour after the service, he called me and said, "Linda gave her life to the Lord on our way home from church." Even though they lived a short distance from the church, they didn't wait until they arrived home. Linda wanted to know what Marvin did and they pulled to the side of the road, and she prayed for Jesus to be the boss of her life. A few Sundays later, they were baptized.

Both believed they were Christians because they identified with a church. In many ways they acted like Christians because they were moral and attended church faithfully; yet they had an outward religious affiliation and not a faith coming from a transformed heart. Their lives were never the same after their conversion. Their marriage was strengthened; life had new meaning; and they were filled with joy. Marvin became a dynamic evangelist (even though he never left his job as an engineer), telling folks about his new life in Christ.

As Jesus was completing His sermon, He warned the disciples and the multitude to beware of false prophets and false assurance, knowing that the devil was the great deceiver.

Matthew 7:15–23

¹⁵ Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? ¹⁷ So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ So then, you will know them by their fruits. ²¹ Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. ²² Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?" ²³ And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness."

Look Out for False Prophets! (7:15–20)

Warnings against false prophets are found throughout the Bible. In Deuteronomy 13, the test of a false prophet is a theological one. These imposters attempted to lure the children of Israel away from the authority of Moses and told the people to go after other gods and serve them. God poured out His wrath against

these frauds. “But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has counseled rebellion against the Lord your God who brought you from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, to seduce you from the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from among you” (Deuteronomy 13:5).

In Jeremiah 23, the prophet denounced false prophets who led immoral lives and placed no restrictions on the immoral actions of others (23:10–14). They preached false peace regardless of the condition of a person’s heart (23:16–17). A true prophet preaches repentance and judgment for sins (23:22). “Behold, I am against those who have prophesied false dreams,’ declares the Lord, ‘and related them and led My people astray by their falsehoods and reckless boasting; yet I did not send them or command them, nor do they furnish this people the slightest benefit,’ declares the Lord” (23:32).

Ezekiel warned of false prophets who speak from their own wisdom without having a word from the Lord (Ezekiel 12:21–14:11). They speak of peace and share a message of shallow optimism that is devoid of repentance and morality, yet the people trust their lies. God declares, “I will set My face against that man and make him a sign and a proverb, and I will cut him off from among My people. So you will know that I am the Lord” (Ezekiel 14:8).

Some false prophets even used magic to bring false assurance like the magicians of Egypt who also turned their staffs into serpents just as Moses and Aaron had done (Exodus 7:11). Barnabas and Saul were opposed by a Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus, who also was described as a magician. Yet Saul

(Paul) was filled with the Holy Spirit and denounced him, and the hand of the Lord came against him, and he was blinded. When the proconsul saw this, he believed and was amazed at the teaching of the Lord (Acts 13:6–12). Jesus warned of false Christs and false prophets who show signs and wonders and try to lead even the elect astray (Mark 13:22).

The Apostle Peter spoke of these false prophets when he alerted the early church. “But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who brought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; and in *their* greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep” (2 Peter 2:1–3).

Jesus used the metaphors of sheep and goats and good and bad trees to demonstrate the contrast between true and false prophets. False prophets are like ravenous wolves dedicated to destruction who come dressed in sheep’s clothing. Peter warned the church to be of sober spirit and on the alert. “Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). Perhaps Peter remembered his own experience in Caesarea Philippi when he boldly confessed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. But, after Jesus praised Peter, a few moments later when Jesus spoke of His impending death, Peter rebuked Him and said this will never happen to you. Jesus turned to Peter and said, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s” (Matthew 16:23).

Satan is a deceiver who disguises himself as an angel of light and his followers as servants of righteousness (2 Corinthians 11:13–15). How do we know when the one who speaks is from God and not a deceiver? Jesus said, “You will know them by their fruits.” Jesus humorously said you will never find a grape growing from a thorn bush or figs from thistles. Even so, good trees produce good fruit and bad trees produce bad fruit. False prophets may be sincere, passionate, compelling, and may even perform signs and wonders (7:22). They may draw large crowds and promise blessings; yet their lifestyles reveal their character of self-promotion.

False prophets seek the blessing of those wielding earthly power instead of speaking a word from the Lord. When King Jehoshaphat of Judah and King Ahab of Israel discussed whether their armies should come together to battle the enemy, the king of Israel called the prophets together to get their advice. About four hundred men told the king what the king wanted to hear, “Go up, for the Lord will give *it* into the hand of the king” (1 Kings 22:6). Only Micaiah, the true prophet of the Lord spoke boldly that the battle would bring death to the king. As a result, Micaiah was put into prison and the king who listened to the false prophets died just as the prophet warned.

A true prophet is one who demonstrates the fruit of the Spirit and who faithfully proclaims accurately the Word of the Lord. Professor Carson wrote, “Cheap grace preaches forgiveness without repentance, church membership without rigorous church discipline, discipleship without obedience, blessing without persecution, joy without righteousness, results without obedience.”¹

Known by Their Fruit

Jesus said we will know false prophets by their fruits. "Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with passions and desires" (Galatians 5:19–24).

2 Corinthians 11:13–15

"For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their deeds."

Don't Be Fooled by False Assurance! (7:21–23)

In verses 21–23, Jesus' words should create a pause for all of us. He stated, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter

the kingdom of heaven.” Who was Jesus addressing? Their theology appears to be correct; they call Jesus Lord. They gave themselves to worthwhile causes. “Lord, Lord, did we not prophecy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?” They were obviously involved in Christian ministries as preachers, teachers, and leaders of the church. Yet just like the Pharisees and scribes, they had an outward religion and not a change of heart. The spiritual leaders who rejected Jesus during His earthly ministry gave alms to the poor, prayed three times a day in the Temple, fasted two days a week, gave themselves to the study of the Scripture and were disciplined in keeping the Law. On the day of judgment, Jesus will say to those who have not been born again, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.”

Paul testified about the shallowness of this life in Philippians 3:2–14. “If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ” (3:4–7). If anyone could have been saved by good works, Paul would have been that person. Neither his heritage, orthodoxy, personal righteousness, nor religious zeal gave him new life. When he saw Christ, he realized all of his good deeds were no more than rubbish. Rather than bringing him to Christ, these dead works became a stumbling block to himself and to others.

Paul would not trade his new life with Christ for all of the achievements of his previous life. He said, “I count all things to be

loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord (3:8).” His new passion in life was to know Christ, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings. “I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus” (3:12). He didn’t want to miss out on what God had already prepared for him. Even in his suffering, he experienced the grace and mercy of God.

Implications and Actions

We must listen closely to Jesus’ words lest we be deceived by false prophets or tragically deceive ourselves.

How do we know if our faith is real? The test of faith is more than just our proclamation, or even our orthodoxy or success in Christian ministries. Jesus told us we will be known by our fruits. Satan may duplicate words, actions, and even some signs, yet he cannot produce the fruit of the Spirit. Satan cannot counterfeit *agape* love or *karis* grace. Only God can make us genuinely love our enemies or produce in us a hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Questions

1. Who are some of the false prophets of our day?

2. How do we know who to believe and who not to believe?

3. What is the clearest test of authenticity?

4. What are the consequences of false assurance?

5. How do I know my faith is real?

ENDNOTES

¹ D. A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5–7* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978), 131.

lesson 13



Surviving the Storms

MAIN IDEA

We will all face storms in life. Whether or not we can withstand them depends on our life's foundation.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

In my most recent challenge in life, where did I turn for help?

STUDY AIM

Jesus described the choice that each of us must make; narrow gate or broad gate, good tree or bad tree, genuine disciple or false follower, and the wise builder or foolish builder. Which path have I chosen?

QUICK READ

Jesus concluded His sermon with the urgent message that those who hear these words and fail to act face destruction. Yet those who heed these words will withstand even life's challenges.

Introduction

As we come to the conclusion of our lessons from the Sermon on the Mount, I believe Jesus' message is about God's grace that leads to righteousness. God's grace brings comfort to the grieving. God's grace creates a hunger for righteousness. God's grace offers forgiveness essential to a pure heart. God's grace comforts those being persecuted.

Only by the grace of God can a person love an enemy or forgive abundantly. God graciously allows fallen humanity to call Him *Abba*. By the grace of God, a person does acts of charity for the glory of God not for self-acclaim. God's grace replaces anxiety with peace and produces a grievance of one's sins greater than the shortfall seen in others. Boldness comes by the grace of God to His children allowing them to keep on asking, knocking, and seeking. God's grace produces the fruit of righteousness consisting of love, joy, and peace.

The house built on a solid foundation is not one constructed on good works, religious practices, or socially accepted morals. The life that withstands storms is one built on the undeserved matchless grace of a righteous God, Who has made Himself available to us through the transforming work of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 7:24–29

²⁴ Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ And the rain fell, and the floods came,

and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶ Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷ The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell—and great was its fall.

²⁸ When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching; ²⁹ for He was teaching them as *one* having authority, and not as their scribes.

Everyone Is Building a House

Jesus' sermon demands action. He who hears and acts on what he has heard is wise; but he who hears and fails to act is foolish. The person who listens to the words of Jesus, who may even be impressed, yet unless he chooses the narrow road and takes appropriate action, he is doomed.

The Lord applied this parable to everyone; no one is exempt. We are all building a house; and the house is our life. The house we build, or the life we prepare, brings consequences. We must live in the house we build.

We build our lives intellectually. A diligent life-long learner will take advantage of educational opportunities offering tools for continuous learning. This preparation offers unique prospects for exploring new experiences and creating innovative ways to address the needs of others. Yet the one who is intellectually lazy will be foolish.

We also build our lives physically. When we ignore warnings early in life about the benefits of exercise, healthy diet, and ab-

stinence from harmful practices like tobacco, drugs, alcohol, we will suffer the consequences later. Socially, how we relate to our family, friends, and associates, leads to a life rich with meaningful relationships or one of loneliness and isolation.

Our practices, morals, values, habits, and experiences construct a house (or life) that becomes the one in which we must live. Therefore, Jesus warned us to build a life built on a solid foundation.

I heard the story of a young graduate student who found herself at a serious crossroads for her life direction. An influential elderly professor was an agnostic, who lived alone and had become a hardened, critical, intellectual, angry, and isolated person. Yet she obviously saw great potential in the young scholar and wished that she would follow in her steps. The professor was about the same age as the student's grandmother who never attended college but was surrounded by a large family with her husband, many children, and grandchildren. The grandmother was a person with a deep Christian faith who was kind, gracious, and full of love for and from others. She also faced the future with a quiet confidence in the hope that had sustained her throughout her life and offered her comfort for eternity.

As the student evaluated the contrasting personalities, she decided she would rather follow the way of her grandmother than that of the callous professor.

We are all building a house and we must live in the house we build.

Every House Will Face Storms

The Lord doesn't warn us to build a house where storms are non-existent. He reminds us that we will all face storms. No one is immune from sickness, sorrow, rejection, failure, and other of life's challenges. As parents we want to protect our children from these painful experiences, yet it is impossible to build a cocoon around them that keeps them from pain. We live in bodies that will ultimately decay and a world where natural calamities and moral evil exist.

Jesus didn't say *if* the rain falls, the floods come, and the winds blow and slam against the house. He spoke of the certainty of these life calamities. Some believe trusting in God will protect them from the heartaches of life; yet many of the greatest Christian testimonies come from those who are suffering the most. We have all seen the courage and peace of godly persons who demonstrate faith and hope in the midst of a health crisis, or peace even while they experience the deep pain and loss of a loved one. I have heard the testimony of individuals of all ages who demonstrate joy and confidence in the presence of Christ while suffering unspeakable persecution.

The cross is the symbol of our faith. Jesus declared to the disciples, "if anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). Paul wrote, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; *we are* afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus,

so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body” (2 Corinthians 4:7–10).

The early church leaders were not sheltered from the storms of life. Christian tradition claims all of the apostles except John were martyrs, and even John suffered imprisonment. Throughout the centuries, Christians have been persecuted for their faith, facing prison, beatings, isolation, and even martyrdom.

Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, was burned at the stake in A.D. 155. At his execution he said, “Eighty and six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King and Savior?” As he died, he said, “I bless you, Father, for judging me worthy of this hour, so that in the company of martyrs I may share the cup of Christ.”

Perpetua, a twenty-two-year-old, third-century martyr was a young mother at the time of her execution that took place at a military celebration of Emperor Severus’ birthday. Felicitas, her servant, was executed with her. Perpetua’s father came to her while she was in prison and offered her an easy way to save herself. All she had to do was deny her faith in Christ. She responded, “Father do you see that vase? Could it be called by any other name? Well, neither can I be called anything other than who I am, a Christian.”

On February 12, 2015, the Islamic State of Iraq, released a report showing photos of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christian construction workers who were beheaded for their faith. I have a picture commemorating their courage on my office wall. On an average, twenty Christians are said to be killed every day because of their allegiance to Christ.

These courageous martyrs join the ranks of those mentioned in Revelation 6:9–11. “When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’ And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until *the number* of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also.”

Most of us in the West will not be asked to pay the ultimate price of martyrdom for our faith. However, we have other storms that will come our way and test our faith. Prolonged illness, rejection by a loved one, or the death of a son or daughter after a lengthy painful illness may take more courage than the swift action of an executioner. Storms appear from many fronts. The question persists, will we stay strong?

“True religion is not easily distinguished from the counterfeit until it is put to the test.”¹ “John Calvin observed, ‘Sometimes a storm or crisis or calamity betrays what manner of person we are, for true piety is not fully distinguished from its counterfeit till it comes to trial.’”²

The House With a Solid Foundation Will Stand

Who is the person who built his life on the rock? Jesus said the one “who hears these words of Mine and acts on them.” Only Christ provides a solid foundation. Obedience to His words sus-

tains us through the storms of life, not self-righteousness, religion, nor cultural ideals.

What words did Jesus refer to? In Matthew 5:20, Jesus said, “For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses *that* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” No one did self-righteousness better than the scribes and Pharisees. Paul, who was a Pharisee, said, “If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless” (Philippians 3:4–6). Yet none of these privileges brought the joy he craved. Paul continued by saying these things were actually loss compared to knowing Christ Jesus his Lord. The very actions he thought would bring him peace with God had actually deterred him from recognizing God was in their midst. Human effort and self-righteousness are not enough. We need the grace of God that transforms us.

When Jesus spoke of those whose lives were built on the rock, He spoke of those whose lives were transformed by the grace of God and received a new nature. Jesus told the Pharisee, Nicodemus, who was a ruler of the Jews, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). He continued, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

1 Corinthians 3:10–13

“According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work.”

The wise one is the one who chooses to enter through the narrow gate, who hears the words of Jesus and obeys them. The person whose life is built on the foundation of Jesus and His Word, builds a foundation for life that withstands the storms he/she will encounter.

Implications and Actions

As I mentioned in an earlier lesson, Oscar Thompson was a professor of evangelism at Southwestern Seminary and a friend of mine who died from cancer after a heroic five-year battle with the illness. When we asked him where he received his courage and peace during the struggle, he often paraphrased the quote from *Pilgrim’s Progress* and said, “I’ve been to the bottom and it’s solid.” Jesus is the Rock on which we stand that provides for us even through life’s storms.

A Profound Parable

"These words are so simple and their meaning so clear that comment is hardly necessary. Yet it is a profound parable. Jesus holds up two men who were alike in many ways. Both were hearers, perhaps sitting next to each other in the same pew. They read the same Scriptures and sang from the same hymnbook. Both were builders, each erecting his own dwelling place. And both faced the same torrential rain and flood and hurricane.

"But there were differences. The man who heard and did was a sensible man; the one who heard, and perhaps agreed, and did nothing more, was foolish. The first built on the rock; the second on the sand. The wise man weathered the storm; the fool went down."³

As we conclude this series on the Sermon on the Mount, re-read Matthew 5–7 and jot down specific commands such as: "Let your light shine," "Love your enemies," and "Enter by the narrow gate." How do these commands speak to you?

Were the folks who called Jesus "Lord," and who prophesied in His name and cast out demons and performed miracles sincere in believing their actions were pleasing to God? How can we know our faith is genuine?

Questions

1. When have you faced a difficulty in your life that tested your faith?
2. Was there a particular passage from the Bible or a favorite hymn that brought you hope and courage?
3. Have you witnessed a Christian brother or sister that became an example to you of one whose life was built on a solid foundation?
4. Are you currently experiencing a crisis in your life that challenges your faith?

5. Do you have a Christian support group that will walk with you through this crisis? Are you willing to ask your Sunday School class to stand with you during this time of need?

ENDNOTES

- 1 T. C. Smith, *The Sermon on the Mount, A Study Guide* (Greenville, SC: Smyth & Helwys, 1992), 111.
- 2 David S. Dockery and David E. Garland, *Seeking the Kingdom* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1992), 119.
- 3 Clarence Jordan, *Sermon on the Mount, Revised Edition* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1989), 122–123.

lesson

Christmas

Hope Has Come!

MAIN IDEA

The Creator became flesh that we might be redeemed.

QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE

How may I remember that the Christ child I celebrate at Christmas is the King of kings and Lord of lords? Have I allowed Jesus to leave the cradle to become Lord of my life?

STUDY AIM

We must introduce our world, which is living in darkness and death, to the One who offers light and life.

QUICK READ

Jesus is the Creator, the Light of the world, who has come in the flesh as our Redeemer.

Introduction

During the Sundays leading to Christmas, we have celebrated the coming of the Christ child, lighting the candles of hope, peace, joy, and love. Each Sunday we have sung Christmas carols that many of us learned as children. Many have been privileged to see or participate in Christmas pageants, caroling, or even parades. Even our culture joins the celebration with Christmas trees, lights, cards, and gifts. It is truly a wonderful time of the year.

We love to tell the stories of wisemen and shepherds coming to a peaceful manger scene with little baby Jesus being adored by a young mother who appears to suffer no side-effects from a natural birth delivered in a barn, while the baby lies silently among admiring sheep and cattle. It is no wonder that the irreverent racecar driver Ricky Bobby, played by Will Ferrell in *Talladega Nights*, gave the blessing over his meal of Dominoes, KFC, and Taco Bell, addressing God as, “Dear Lord Baby Jesus.” Finally, his wife Carley interrupted him and said, “Jesus did grow up!” Ricky Bobby replied, “But I like baby Jesus.”

When we are honest, do we really prefer baby Jesus to the crucified Lord? Baby Jesus does not threaten our priorities, our lifestyle, or confront our sins. Baby Jesus makes no demands on us. Thousands followed Jesus when He healed the sick and fed the multitudes, but as a result of His teaching, “many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore” (John 6:66).

Actually, that Christmas night was anything but a Hallmark event. In this cosmic battle, the Logos took on flesh, splitting history into two periods of time, before and after Christ, challenging the domain of Satan, and offering hope and eternal life to

those who believe. Today as we celebrate Christmas, may we see the baby in light of the crucified, risen, and coming Son of God?

John 1:1–14

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. ⁴ In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. ⁵ The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. ⁶ There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through Him. ⁸ He was not the Light, but **he came** to testify about the Light. ⁹ There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. ¹¹ He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. ¹² But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, **even** to those who believe in His name, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Jesus Is the Logos in a World of Chaos

The Apostle John, writer of the fourth gospel, was very clear about the purpose of his gospel. “These have been written so that

you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:31). At the time of the writing of the gospel, John was living in Ephesus among Gentiles who had no concept of the Messiah. How would he communicate to them that Jesus was the Christ?

Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher, was also from Ephesus and lived there around 560 BC. He is remembered for his teaching that everything in this world is in a state of flux. “His famous illustration was that it is impossible to step twice in the same river. You step into the river once; you step out again; you step in again; but you never step into the same water again, for the river has flowed on and it is a different river. To Heraclitus everything was like that, everything was in a constantly changing state of flux. But if that be so, why is life not complete chaos? How can there be any sense in a world where there is constant, never-ceasing, continuous flux and change? The answer of Heraclitus was: all this chance and flux is not haphazard; it is controlled and ordered; it is following a continuous pattern all the time; and that which controls the pattern is the Logos, the Word, the Reason of God.”¹

John informed the Ephesians, and all who read his gospel, that he had met the Logos; and His name is Jesus. Jesus is God, One with God, Creator, and Light. He is fully God and man, taking on flesh and dwelling among us (1:14). John spoke as an eyewitness to His humanity and divinity. He personally heard Jesus speak, saw the miracles, and witnessed the crucifixion and resurrection. He identified Jesus as the unique, only begotten, *monogena*, Son of God who offers salvation to those who are born again by believing in Him (paraphrase of John 3:16).

We, like the ancient Greeks, question whether or not the world is spinning out of control, with natural disasters, rampant evil, global plagues, mass migrations, and starvations. John reminded us that the baby in Bethlehem is none other than the Creator and Sustainer of life, the Logos, who is still on His throne, redeeming all who call on His Name.

Jesus Is Life in the Midst of Death

When was your first experience with death? Was it the death of a pet? Or tragically was it the death of a family member or friend? Do you remember the painful awareness of the irreversibility and finality of death? Grief is compounded when there is no hope of resurrection. A world without God and the promise of eternal life is filled with bitterness, anger, and hopelessness. Yet many believe we are creatures of accident, living without beginning or continuation, existing without purpose nor promise of forgiveness, mercy, or life beyond the grave.

Too often we question God's presence in our grief. We respond just as Martha and Mary did after their brother Lazarus died when they both stated, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:21 and 32). We too cry out in our pain asking, "Jesus where are You?" Jesus responded to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26). A delusional person can make bold prophetic statements; yet Jesus proved His declaration by raising Lazarus from the grave after he had been dead for four days. Yet the final proof came that Jesus is

the resurrection and the life when Jesus Himself was raised from the dead.

Followers of Christ are not immune to the heartache of grief. Yet we sorrow not as those without hope. “For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him, those who have fallen asleep in Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 4:14).

Jesus Is Light in the Domain of Darkness

The baby Jesus may have been born at night. The gospel of Luke doesn't mention the time of day and we are only told that Mary gave birth “when the days were completed for her to give birth” (Luke 2:6). However, we do know that the announcement was given to the shepherds at night while they were tending the sheep. Nighttime was certainly the appropriate time because the world was living in darkness. Neither Herod the king nor even the chief priests and the scribes rushed to Bethlehem to worship the newborn king. Herod was anxious to know where this king was born, not to worship him, but because of his paranoia of perceived rivals he wanted to get rid of him. His fear and rage led him to the merciless killing of the boy babies in Bethlehem.

The physical darkness where a young Jewish girl gave birth in a dark, noisy, smelly stable, reflects the moral darkness of the world then and throughout history. Babies are still being killed. Children are being kidnapped and sold into slavery. Wars are waged by crazed egomaniacs while innocent people are caught in the crossfire. The poor are exploited by the rich. Selfishness, greed, anger, lust, envy, dishonesty, jealousy, and addictions continue to plague humanity. Not even schools, hospitals, workplac-

es, churches, mosques, synagogues, nor even homes are immune to violence. “This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil” (John 3:19).

John testified that light has come into this world. Darkness attempts to overpower the light but is unable. Light extinguishes darkness. Just before Jesus announced He was the light of the world; He forgave a woman caught in adultery (John 8:11). Any person may claim supernatural powers and perhaps be arrogant enough to claim moral authority to forgive sins, yet Jesus proved He was the light of the world by healing a man blind from his birth (John 9:7). The One who brought light into this man’s dark world is the One who brings light to all who believe.

I Am

The “I Am” statements of Jesus in the Gospel of John:

- Jesus is the bread of life (6:35).
- Jesus is the light of the world (8:12).
- Jesus is the door to salvation (10:9).
- Jesus is the good shepherd (10:11).
- Jesus is the resurrection and the life (11:25).
- Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life (14:6).
- Jesus is the true vine (15:1–7).

The emperor Nero killed hundreds of Christ followers. Historians wrote he actually burned Christians hanging on crosses to use as lights to provide a path to his gardens. But the light of the gospel spread in spite of the persecution. Christianity continues

to be the most persecuted faith in the world. Powerful nations attempt to outlaw, ban, and restrict the Word of God. Yet the gospel penetrates the darkness with light. In two of the most restrictive countries in the world, China and Iran, the church is growing at an unprecedented pace. Jesus said, “While I am in the world, I am the light of the world” (John 9:5). In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said to His followers, “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does *anyone* light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house” (Matthew 5:14–15).

Darkness is not overcome by cursing the darkness, but by shining the light, or as followers of Christ, by Christians being the light.

1 John 1:1–3

“What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us—what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.”

Implications and Actions

When Randall O'Brien and I were pastors in Arkansas he told the story about a heroic father who rescued his two-year-old son. Northern Arkansas experienced torrential rains and flooding pushing rivers over their banks. The two-year-old fell from a bridge into a raging swollen river. The father jumped into the dark waters to save his son. Miraculously he managed to reach the child, swim to a nearby tree, and hang on for more than an hour while waiting for help. He gave him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation while hanging from the tree. By the time he was rescued, the young boy was blue and appeared lifeless. They rushed him to the hospital, and he was reported to be in critical condition with extreme hypothermia. Thanks to the brave actions of the dad, the boy recovered.

One day when he is older the father will tell him about the river experience and the boy will see his father in a totally different light.

Why would the father jump into a dark raging river to save his son? Because he loves him. The world was troubled, dark, and deadly, yet Jesus took on flesh and jumped in to save us. Why? Because He loves us. The baby in the manger is the King of Kings, Lord of lords, the crucified, risen, and coming again Savior. Surely, we can trust One who loves us so dearly.

Questions

1. What did John mean by calling Jesus the Logos?
2. Why was this so important to the Ephesians?
3. When have you found comfort from Christ during a time of grief?
4. How can Christians be light in our word?
5. How can we celebrate the first coming of Christ in a way that prepares us for His second coming?

ENDNOTES

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John, Volume 1*, (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1956), 11–12.

Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness

“But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:33, ESV).

Father,

I bow my heart before You and acknowledge Your greatness, Your Holiness, and Your Righteousness. I am forever grateful, that when I was poor in spirit, spiritually dead in my sin, by Your rich mercy and amazing grace, You sent Your only Son, Jesus, who paid the price for my sin on the cross giving me peace with You, my Abba Father. Your Word says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3, NIV). I acknowledge that Jesus is the way through the narrow gate, the only road to salvation. Thank you, Lord, for abundant and eternal life. I am grateful You care about my heart, You transform me from the inside out, and help me live a holy life. Awaken my heart to live a life of humility and love as You shape me into a beatitude follower of You.

Lord, You tell me in Your Word, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matthew 5:4, NIV). The deeper I grow in my relationship with You, Oh God, the more clearly, I see my own sin and mourn over my unholiness and unworthiness. I am grateful You have removed the guilt of my sin and given me inner peace. Lord, when the brokenness and tragedies of living in a fallen world causes heartache and grief, I pray that my first response will be to cling to You, my Rock and Refuge, because You are the only One who can truly give me comfort, and calm assurance deep within my being.

Lord, Your Word says, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5, NIV). I pray that in my daily life I will exhibit meekness, relying on Your strength, as I stand for righteousness and justice. I pray I will allow You to be my defender, never seeking retribution for wrongs done toward me. In 1 Samuel, I read how King David refused to kill Saul when he had the chance, instead King David felt troubled in his heart for cutting off the corner of Saul’s robe. David left Saul in Your hands, humbling himself before You, demonstrating complete trust in You, as he refrained from revenge. Your Holy Word tells me, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matthew 5:9,

NIV). I pray You will help me to be a peacemaker, bringing unity, restoring broken relationships, never stirring up trouble, but being active in resolving conflict and pushing back on darkness. As I reflect on Your great mercy in my life, I pray I will extend mercy to others, displaying forgiveness and compassion toward them because Your Word says, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy” (Matthew 5:7, NIV).

Father Your Word says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matthew 5:6, NIV). Stir my inward being and give me a hunger and thirst for righteousness in my life. Remind me to put on the breastplate of righteousness each day, so I can stand firm on the truth of Your Word, never wavering from it, even in the face of persecution, for Your Word says, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:10, NIV). Lord, teach me to live by Your righteous standards as You help me battle daily for a pure heart, a heart after Your heart, because Your Word says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matthew 5:8, NIV). Lord, give me strength to guard against self-righteousness or seeking self-glory to feed my own pride. Kindle in my heart a desire to be as sensitive to others as I am to myself, treating them with love and generosity.

I pray that I will set my mind on the eternal and not the temporary things of this world. May I store up treasure in Heaven, being rich toward You, as I bear fruit that is eternal. Lord, I want to hear Your Word and act on it, and like the wise man who built his house on the rock, I want to build my life on You, my firm foundation, so I can withstand the storms in my life. My desire is to have a heart that is passionate for the things You care about. Lord, when each day dawns may I kneel before You in prayer with a heart that aches and throbs to be alone with You, as I seek Your Kingdom and Your righteousness. Lord, I am thankful for Your grace in my life and that I can rest in Your faithful care and provision. Lord, You met my greatest need in this life for salvation, and I am confident that I can trust You in all things.

In the strong name of Jesus,

Amen

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Lesson 9	Desperate Families	Proverbs 15:15–17
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