

*This study of the Sermon on the Mount is broken into many different sections of varying lengths (Some are just a verse or two). Some sections will likely take much longer to cover than others, so at times it might be best to prepare multiple sections for a single study.*

## **Introduction to the Sermon on the Mount**

The Sermon on the Mount is the common name for Matthew chapters 5-7, three chapters entirely comprised (except for the final two verses) of Jesus' teaching to the gathered crowd. Jesus didn't have the advantages of indoor space or amplification, so he had to seek a place where he could be heard. Those crowds would've needed to really pay attention to Jesus in order to hear him, and - even though we can read his words in Scripture - the same is true for us.

The first two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew begin with a genealogy of Jesus, then tell the familiar story of Mary, Joseph, and the angel, Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, the visit of the wise men, and then the Holy Family's flight to Egypt under threat of Herod followed by their return to Nazareth.

Matthew says nothing about the next 30 years or so, and chapter three jumps ahead to John the Baptist, who fulfills the words of the Isaiah: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight". Jesus joins many others to be baptized by John in the Jordan, during which the Spirit descends upon Jesus and a voice from heaven declares, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. From there Jesus is immediately driven into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Jesus responds to these three temptations by quoting passages from Deuteronomy, after which the devil departs and angels minister to him.

Jesus' baptism and his temptation seem to serve as a kind of preparation for his public ministry. Following John's arrest Jesus began to preach, saying "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Jesus then begins to call disciples, and goes about "all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people. So his fame spread... And great crowds followed him..."

It was very early in his ministry when Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount. At this point the crowds - though they may have heard him speak before, and even seen a healing - really don't know who Jesus is. It's still many chapters before Peter makes his famous confession that Jesus is the Christ. The people there on the mountain with Jesus came because they were just curious, or possibly hopeful, or even skeptical. (And it's also worth remembering that these crowds and others who gathered around Jesus, crowds who heard and saw, even touched, had all vanished by the time Jesus hung on the cross.) The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' extended introduction and description to the kingdom of God, the new age which Jesus came to introduce - not just as a messenger, but as the message itself.

As we just saw, Matthew twice describes Jesus' preaching as about the kingdom:

- "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (4:17)
- "And he went about.... preaching the gospel of the kingdom..." (4:23)

***How would you answer the question, “What did Jesus preach about?” Would you mention “the kingdom”?***

The Gospel of Matthew essentially sums up Jesus’ preaching as, “the kingdom (of heaven)” . When we read the Sermon on the Mount (and the entire Gospel) we need to constantly bear in mind that Jesus is telling us about the kingdom. And he’s not just telling us with words, he’s living it, embodying it - he is the incarnation of it, the king of the kingdom come as a person.<sup>1</sup> To put it another way, if we wonder what the kingdom looks like, it looks like Jesus. In a sense, Jesus is telling us in the Sermon on the Mount what life is like in heaven, what life will be like when heaven comes to earth, when everything comes under the Lordship of Christ, when all is as it should be.

## **The Beatitudes - Matthew 5:3-12**

Jesus begins his description of the kingdom with a series of “Blessed are...” statements commonly known as “the beatitudes.” It’s important to remember that these statements are first *descriptive*, not *prescriptive*. That is, they’re telling us something, not telling us what to do. These aren’t commands. Jesus didn’t choose an indirect way to tell us to be meek, or pure in heart, or to hunger and thirst for righteousness. Of course, these are indeed things God wants us to be, but the blessing of the beatitudes is always a gift from God, not something we attain because we succeeded in trying to be poor in spirit, meek, etc.

Jesus wants to show us something new, to show us that something new is coming and now is, a new age, filled with new possibilities, a new way to live and move and have our being - newness made possible and exemplified by Jesus.

In our everyday experience, it does not appear that these people are, in fact, blessed. The poor in Spirit stay that way, the mourners often despair, the meek get trampled upon, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are frustrated, the merciful get taken advantage of, even the pure in heart struggle to see God, the peacemakers can’t make peace, and the persecuted suffer. Furthermore, these are not the qualities that our culture holds up as most desirable. They are not strong attributes, but weak.

But in the kingdom, all these people and more will be blessed. The world will be turned upside down (the last shall be first, the humble will be exalted, the one who loses his life will find it, etc.) This is how it is in heaven, and this is how it will be when heaven comes to earth. But again, as Jesus already told us, “the kingdom is near” - near because he is here. So these are blessings that not only come when we receive our heavenly reward; these people are blessed wherever the kingdom has come, wherever Jesus is near, wherever people follow Jesus.

One of the new things Jesus came to create is a people, a new community under his Lordship - that is, the church. So if we really are Christian community we should find these things to be

---

<sup>1</sup> In all the Gospels, Jesus speaks of “the kingdom”, but the rest of the New Testament rarely mentions the kingdom. One explanation is that, because Jesus is himself the kingdom come in the flesh, Paul and the other apostles proclaim Jesus himself. The kingdom Jesus proclaimed and embodied is part of what Paul means when he speaks of the “Lord Jesus Christ.” He is Lord of Heaven and Earth, the one who brought Heaven to Earth, and who will come again.

true. We should experience, even if only imperfectly, that these people Jesus says are blessed *really are* blessed exactly because Jesus is with us, because we have been transformed into his likeness.

- 1. Which of the beatitudes resonates most with you? Which seems especially true, or fits with your experience? which of the beatitudes do you really want to experience most?**
- 2. Which of the beatitudes do you see most clearly coming true in our world, in our church, in your life? That is, which of these “Blessed are \_\_\_\_\_” really appears most blessed?**
- 3. Which beatitude is it hardest to believe? That is, which of these “Blessed are \_\_\_\_\_” does it seem are not blessed?**
- 4. Similarly, which of these characteristics (poor in spirit, mournfulness, meekness, etc.) does the world value most? And least?**
- 5. Where in the Gospels do we see Jesus living out these characteristics that he says will be blessed? (that is, where do we see him being merciful, pure in heart, a peacemaker, etc.?)**
- 6. Where in the Gospels do we see Jesus blessing people whom he says in the beatitudes will be blessed?**
- 7. Do you individually, and do we as a church, bless those whom Jesus says are blessed in the kingdom?**
- 8. What are some ways you/we can bless those whom Jesus says are blessed in the kingdom?**

## **Salt and Light - Matthew 5:13-16**

Following the beatitudes, where Jesus gives us a picture of what the kingdom of God looks like, he then issues several statements directed at “You...” One immediate question is, who is this “you” to whom Jesus speaks? An important part of the answer is that this is a plural you. Because English fails to distinguish between second person singular and plural, this is not evident in the text. When Jesus says for instance, “You are the light of the world,” he is saying, “You *all* are the light of the world.” He is speaking to a group of people, not so much individuals. This is made clear when he likens the light of the world to a city on a hill. An individual cannot be a city, but only a group people working together. Once again, it’s important to remember that Jesus has come to create a new community, a kingdom. Of course Jesus wants us each of us as individuals to let our lights shine, but the emphasis in the Sermon on the Mount is on we, not me. He is not so much interested in lots of little lights as in the one great light that we make together - a light which others will see and give glory to our Father in heaven.

The other question then is who is included in this plural you? The you here is the same as the people Jesus said will be blessed in the beatitudes. It is the subjects of the king, those living in the kingdom, the ones who have heard Jesus' call and followed him, the new community he has gathered to worship and proclaim him, whom together Paul calls, "the Body of Christ." It should therefore always be a visible "you", even as the kingdom stretches over time and space.

1. ***Salt was and is used to flavor, preserve, and purify, and in sacrifices<sup>2</sup>. What does it mean for us to be the salt of the earth? What are ways that we can be the salt of the earth in Luxembourg?***
2. ***Light is a very common image in the Bible. What are some of the ways the image of light is used in Scripture?***
3. ***What does it mean for us to be the light of the world? (Isn't Jesus the light of the world!?) Will people in Luxembourg give glory to God if we let our light shine? What are some "good works" that we can do that testify to our Father in heaven?***
4. ***What are some ways that we keep our light hidden instead of holding it up for other to see?***

## **Matthew 5:17-48 - You have heard, but I say (overview)**

*In this section we'll look at 5:17-48 broadly, as a whole. The following lesson will return to look at the teachings in detail. Resist the temptation to get into the details from the start!*

Protestant Christians have understood the Gospel largely in contrast to the law.<sup>3</sup> Luther in particular emphasized that the law is powerless to save, even that the law should be ignored altogether lest we find ourselves thinking we can work our way to God by obeying it. But here Jesus says that he has come, not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. By this he means that he is the one to which the law points, he is the righteousness that law was intended to produce. And not only that, Jesus tells us that anyone who relaxes the commandments or teaches others to do so is least in the kingdom of heaven! What are we to make of this!? For one, much seems

---

<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 2:13 reads, "You shall season all your cereal offerings with salt; you shall not let the salt of your covenant with your God be lacking from your cereal offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt." See also Ezekiel 43:24.

<sup>3</sup> It's worth mentioning that Christians have often (willfully) misunderstood Judaism, both today and in Jesus' day. We have tended to create a simple caricature of a people hopelessly lost in their sins while they futilely attempt to reach God through the law (the law which - not to forget - God gave them!). And, of course, there were certainly some who took pride in their law observance while "neglecting the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy, and faith" (Matthew 23:23). But there were undoubtedly many more who would agree that Jesus answered well when he said that the two greatest commandments were to "'Love the Lord your God with all your mind, heart, soul, and strength,' and 'To love your neighbor as yourself.'" God gave His chosen people the law to point them to God, and though indeed the law cannot finally bring us into right relationship with God, the law was still a good thing - a God commanded thing. The average Jew was not as bad as the worst of their leaders, which fortunately is true of us as well.

to hang on what Jesus means by the words “all” and “accomplished”.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the most likely interpretation is that he means his death and resurrection, but this is not clear. And then he goes on to say something that appears quite contrary to what we’d expect Jesus to say; “I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Beginning in verse 21, Jesus issues six statements following the formula, “You have heard... but I say...” which shed considerable light on his statement in the preceding verse. Here Jesus begins a kind of reinterpretation - even an intensification - of the law.

- Whereas the law said that those who kill shall be liable to judgment, Jesus tells us that anyone who is angry with or insults a sister or brother shall be liable, even to the fires of hell!
- Whereas the law prohibited adultery, Jesus tells us that even to look upon another lustfully is to commit adultery.
- Whereas the law allows legal divorce, Jesus equates remarriage with adultery (except on the grounds of infidelity).
- Whereas the law said we should not swear falsely, Jesus says we should not swear<sup>5</sup> at all.
- Whereas the law approves but limits retribution (an eye for an eye), Jesus forbids it altogether.
- Whereas the law commands that we love our neighbor but hate our enemy, Jesus says that we should love and pray for our enemies.

Jesus is telling us that the law is not enough. Some people - including Paul - did manage to keep all 613 commandments. It actually was possible, and in that sense, as Paul says, he was “blameless”. But he had managed to keep all the commandments and deny Christ, which showed him the inadequacy of the law. Likewise, Jesus is telling us that even perfect law observance does not bring us into the kingdom. Instead, Jesus highlights a higher “law”, a spirit of the law above the law itself, a spirit the letter of the law could not achieve. This is about more than just the attitude with which we do the things we’re supposed to do. As always, the kingdom is in view here: this is the law of the kingdom, a new law made possible by Jesus for those who follow him. Before him such a law was impossible, but now, in him, the kingdom has come and is coming. At the risk of oversimplifying it, the point is not to bring about new and improved laws; the point is to call people to be like Jesus himself.

It’s also important to see, that this whole section in which Jesus shows us a higher “law”, is all about relationships - relationships with other people. Jesus never once mentioned anything about belief. In this section, it’s all about what we do - or don’t do - to others. The kingdom is full of other people (some of whom we might not like!) and so Jesus puts prolonged emphasis on how we relate to one another, and thus what kind of people we form together.

---

<sup>4</sup> Most Christians have an incoherent relationship with the law. We tend to pick out the parts of the law we like and insist that everyone should obey them while we also ignore the parts of the law we don’t like - and without ever giving a good explanation for why one part of the law is in effect while the other is not. Christians have been struggling with this for as long as there have been Gentile Christians, and we’ve never settled on a really good way of sorting out which parts of the law we should observe and which we can ignore.

<sup>5</sup> Swearing refers to making oaths, not to saying naughty words.

In verses 21-47 shows what this higher “law” looks like, what it would mean for our righteousness to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. And then in the last verse of chapter 5, Jesus sums up all that he has said: “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” This is a statement that has long confounded theologians. To whom does this “you” refer? Does Jesus actually expect us to be perfect? Surely he knows that we’re sinners who always fall short! Some have suggested that Jesus says this to prove just that, to make obvious that we cannot be righteous enough. But why would he tell us to something we can’t do? Or can we, in some sense, “be perfect”? Is this possible, or impossible? I’m not sure it’s possible, but I don’t think we should too quickly conclude that it’s impossible either. I think we might like to reach that conclusion to get ourselves off the hook, to convince ourselves that Jesus didn’t really mean for these commands to be taken seriously, he was just proving a point. But even if perfection is not attainable, it is our goal. We can’t be exactly like Jesus - but we should still try. And in the kingdom of God, this will be the “law” that everyone follows.

- 1. How does Jesus fulfill the law and the prophets? How did the law point to Jesus?***
- 2. What should be our relationship to the old law? Is it still in effect? Which parts? What role does it play?***
- 3. If we’re honest, would we, in a way, rather have the old law, rather than the higher law of Jesus? Would we rather have rules to follow than to follow Jesus?***
- 4. Is what Jesus asks of here even possible for us? Is it easier or harder than following the old law?***
- 5. Why are human relationships so important to Jesus? How do our human relationships relate to our relationship with God?***
- 6. Does Jesus really mean that we “must be perfect”? Does he expect that we can keep all of these commands all the time? What are the consequences if we don’t?***

## **You have heard, but I say (up close) - Matthew 5:21-48**

Having look at verses 21-48 in broad view, let’s not return to look at what Jesus says in greater detail.

### **5:21-26**

Jesus tells us that we not only should we not kill (usually easy enough to obey), we should not even be angry with a brother or sister (a much harder thing, to be sure). This a dramatic intensification of the law, from something relatively easy to obey to something apparently impossible. Jesus declares that, if we really hunger and thirst for righteousness, we won’t only

observe the outer, obvious for all to see, part of the law - we will desire the harder teaching which requires our hearts be transformed to be more like Christ. This is in contrast to the scribes and Pharisees who flawlessly maintained the letter of the law but failed to maintain the spirit of the law.

Jesus is indeed calling his followers to have their inner lives transformed, but he's also making a point about relationships in the kingdom. By using "brother" Jesus is suggesting a fellow disciple, a fellow Christian. He doesn't mean that it's fine to insult or be angry with non-Christians (it's not!), but - as the remainder of the passage shows - Jesus is drawing our attention to the importance of being reconciled to our brothers and sisters.

While it's obvious to see the way that killing damages a community, the failure to be reconciled also severely harms the Body of Christ. How can people who refuse to reconcile with one another give witness to the reconciliation Christ makes possible? At stake here is the kingdom itself, the truth of what Jesus proclaims. It's all for nothing if Jesus' followers cannot be reconciled to one another.<sup>6</sup> So, Jesus tells us, if we are offering a gift on the altar (or doing any other important thing we're supposed to do) but remember that we're not reconciled to a sister or brother, we should leave whatever we're doing to go be reconciled. It's so essential that it comes before everything else, even worship. If we can't manage to be reconciled to an accuser (even perhaps when it's not our fault!) Jesus tells us that we will be punished. This is not God's punishment but rather one we inflict on ourselves when but ourselves outside of right relationship with one another and with the church.<sup>7</sup> There is heavy price to pay: potentially everything we have.

- 1. Do you ever feel like you keep the outer "law" even while your heart sins? Do you "do the right thing" even while inwardly you're angry with someone, wishing a person harm?***
- 2. How do divisions and disputes within a church affect the community? Does it weaken the church's witness?***
- 3. Can we as individuals claim to be living and proclaiming the Gospel if we are not reconciled to our sisters and brothers?***
- 4. How does our own reconciliation with one another reflect Christ reconciling us with God?***
- 5. Answer at your own risk: Are there people in the church with whom you need to be reconciled?***

---

<sup>6</sup> In John 17:20-21 Jesus prays that Christians will be unified, and he then draws a direct connection between their unity and other people coming to believe in Him. If Christians are not unified, Jesus implies, then others will not believe that He is one with the Father. This is no small matter.

<sup>7</sup> See also Matthew 18:15-20. Here Jesus details the procedure through which we should be reconciled to one another - and what happens when someone refuses. While it might seem harsh to put someone out of the fellowship, the truth is that, by failing to be reconciled, the person has already put him/herself out of the fellowship. The health of the community is more important to Jesus than any one person, and by making clear that someone has broken fellowship he also establishes the possibility of them returning to right relationship.

## 5:27-30

This passage addresses a similar concern to the previous. While, adultery was and is more common than murder, still many, many people have managed to avoid it. This is a commandment we can keep, but again, Jesus intensifies it: to look upon another lustfully is to create adultery in our hearts. We might wish to insulate ourselves from Jesus' words by telling ourselves that, while we may have looked at others, we haven't really done so in such a way that really equals lust and therefore adultery. Possibly... but that really misses the point. However good or bad our hearts might be, they certainly are not entirely pure. The degree of our sin isn't really the issue here, and we should all find ourselves implicated by what Jesus says. Once more Jesus draws a distinction between the outward and the inward, and again the inward always has outward consequences.

Just as Jesus said we should leave all else in order to pursue reconciliation, so Jesus tells us that, we should remove whatever causes us to sin - even our own hands and eyes! We probably immediately wonder if Jesus means this literally or is just making a point. There are at least a few people in history who have famously taken this verse literally, which I don't necessarily recommend, but which might actually be, in certain cases, the right thing to do. Indeed it is better to enter life without a hand or an eye than to go to hell with your body intact! Whether or not it comes to removing limbs, Jesus' point remains: we should take extreme measures in removing stumbling blocks from our path.

Again, there is also a relational aspect to Jesus' words. When we lust after another, it affects many relationships, and when it happens within community, it affects the community itself.

1. ***In this passage and the previous, does Jesus expect us to succeed in following his command, or is he just making a point?***
2. ***Is Jesus holding us accountable for every thought that pops into our heads?***
3. ***How do things we think about - but never act on - affect us?***
4. ***How does lust affect relationships?***
5. ***Would you go so far as to remove an eye or hand to avoid sinning? Why not?***
6. ***Is there something that causes you to sin that needs to be removed, even at great cost?***

## 5:31-32

The Law of Moses allowed for divorce (but not remarriage to anyone other than the original spouse). Jesus, however, says that divorce - except for the reason of infidelity/sexual immorality - is adultery, and any man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. Later in Matthew 19:8-9, Jesus says nearly the same thing, with the addition that Moses only granted



the legality of divorce as a concession to the Israelites hardness of heart. This later passage (19:3-7) also provides context for just why Jesus so opposes adultery: because it separates what God has brought together. Here again Jesus is talking about relationships, albeit the very particular relationship of marriage.

This is a hard teaching. One of the troubling aspects is that Jesus seems only to be addressing men, and then - as now - there were different sexual expectations for men and women.<sup>8</sup> A man who sleeps around might've be disapproved, but a woman could be stoned. And today a man's sexual prowess is often cause for boasting while a woman's is considered shameful. While some things may not change, there is still a great cultural and temporal distance between this passage and our world. Would not Jesus, for instance, consent to a woman leaving her physically abusive husband? Is his prohibition on divorce really as absolute as it seems? Indeed, Christians have used this passage to counsel women in abusive relationships to stick with their men.

Certainly our culture needs to take it's commitments - especially marriage - more seriously. The bond of marriage is not to be thrown off as soon as one party doesn't feel "fulfilled" or is interested in pursuing other things. What God has brought together, no one should separate. To be truly righteous requires submitting our individual desires for the sake of the union. And yet, there are times when it seems - regrettable as it is - that the best thing is for a marriage to end. And here, to be clear, I'm speaking for myself - but I imagine Jesus would agree. Even when there is deep hurt in a marriage, we must always pursue and hope for the reconciliation made possible in Christ. But reconciliation requires the willingness of both parties.

What is less clear is if Jesus would consent to remarriage. Throughout history most Christians have allowed for divorce (like Moses) but have not allowed remarriage, based largely on Jesus' words that a man marrying a divorced woman commits adultery (and presumably a woman marrying a divorced man does the same). At the same time, it's undeniable that there are many grace-filled, redemptive, God-honoring second marriages. My father married a divorced woman - and I'm grateful he did! This is a passage that we should take very seriously - and handle with great care. It should also make us consider why we get married in the first place.

- 1. How does this passage fit with what comes before? (And what follows?)**
- 2. How does Jesus' vision of marriage differ from that of our culture? Why do Christians get - and stay - married?**
- 3. How does marriage - and its endurance - build the kingdom of God?<sup>9</sup>**

---

<sup>8</sup> The best (but not especially satisfying) explanation for this disparity is the concern in that culture - as in some still today - to determine parentage. Obviously we care who the father is on our culture too, but in cultures where land, title, honor, etc. were passed to the first male child, it was essential knowledge for a functioning society. A woman with multiple partners jeopardized that, whereas a man who slept around could still rely on the woman to tell him the child was his.

<sup>9</sup> In Matthew 22:30 Jesus said that in heaven there will be no marriage. At the very least it's clear that marriage is part of God's desire for human life on Earth and, I think, when heaven comes to earth.

**4. Does Jesus mean exactly what he seems to say? In light of what Jesus says, should Christians allow divorce and remarriage? Does Jesus say other things elsewhere that might help shed light on the question?**

## **5:33-37**

Oaths functioned as a kind of guarantee that the one making the oath would do whatever he swore he would do. Say you sold someone something, she might make an oath that she would pay you tomorrow in order to reassure you. Of course, this only works if making - and breaking - an oath is understood to be a big deal. If people are breaking oaths all the time, then trust breaks down, it becomes hard to do business, and the community suffers. So there was also a divine component to oaths, with the implication that breaking them would result in some kind of divine penalty. So the prohibition against breaking the oath was not just a communal norm but part of the law, which provided ample reason to not break an oath - but it's also not hard to see how someone might want to risk breaking an oath.

When I was young, kids would say, "I swear to God!" in order to demonstrate that they really were telling the truth. They might also say something like, "I swear on my grandmother's grave!" or some such. The idea, of course, is that they wouldn't invoke something so serious if they weren't serious too. Even saying, "I promise" is a kind of oath, because we only say this when we're not sure the person believes us (possibly because we've given them good reason not to believe us!). But Jesus says we shouldn't make oaths, that is, we shouldn't swear. We shouldn't invoke heaven, or God's throne, or anything else (even your head!?). Instead simply let your yes be yes and your no be no.

What Jesus means is that we should be people who speak truthfully, who mean what they say and say what they mean. If we were truly righteous, we would not need to swear oaths because our trustworthiness would be known to all. Of course, this doesn't only have to do with speech: it requires that our actions are consistent with our promises, commitments, and obligations. In the kingdom, people will not need to swear oaths because everyone can be trusted, because no one will try to deceive.

However, letting your reputation proceed you only works if people know you. In a village, this is how it works. People trust the mechanic - or they don't - because they know, from experience, that he's either trustworthy or not (and people talk!). But in our society - even in a place as relatively small as Luxembourg - we have mostly anonymous interactions. The person in the shop has never seen us before and might never again. So we have all kinds of security measures to insure that no one can cheat or steal (which, needless to say, don't always work). But it will not be so in the kingdom - and it shouldn't be so in a church either. One sign that the kingdom of God has arrived (even if only in part) is that people can be honest with and trust one another.

**1. In our culture, what kind of oaths do we make (or are essentially forced to make)? What would happen if we didn't make them?**

2. ***Do people believe you when you say you'll do something? Do you do what you say you'll do?***
3. ***How does saying what we mean and meaning what we say build the kingdom of God?***
4. ***Is it possible to obey Jesus' words in the church? If not, why? How can we create communities where people are honest and trusting of one another?***

## **5:38-42**

The law of "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" sounds a bit barbaric to modern ears, as it seems to command direct recompense for every offense. At first glance it might seem to suggest that if someone knocks out my tooth, I must go and take out one of his teeth. But the point of this law was actually to limit retribution. Typically violence tends to escalate as enemies do worse and worse things to one another. Revenge is rarely restrained. So this law commands those who have suffered an offense that they should not seek more in repayment than what they've suffered. It's not hard to imagine how a person who had a tooth knocked out might want to do something much more severe to the person who injured her. The law forbids going to new extremes, but it also assumes the rightness of repayment and punishment.

Jesus tells us that, not only should we not practice recompense or revenge of any kind, we should offer even more of ourselves to the one who seeks to take from us. This is a hard teaching and few of us manage to follow it. *This is not how the world works! Anyone who does this will be taken advantage of; we should stand up for ourselves! People who wrong us need to suffer!* But Jesus tells us that this is exactly what his followers must do - and, indeed, it's exactly what he did on his way to the cross. Believing in Jesus means that we must follow him, and following him means that we actually do the things he did. Jesus' life was out of step with conventional wisdom - and he suffered greatly - but he was raised from the dead. The resurrection shows us that God redeems righteous suffering. If we say we believe in Jesus, we need to be trying to do the things he told us to do.

So it seems crazy to literally turn the other cheek to a person who strikes us in the face, but Jesus seems to mean exactly that. Jesus suffered great injustice and never retaliated - nor did he allow his followers to fight back either. He showed us what it means - and what it costs - to be righteous. Whenever we refuse violence, we do so not only because vengeance is the Lord's, but even more to be like and witness to the Christ who overcame death by willfully going to the cross - and who rose again.

It also seems crazy that we should give our coat to someone who sues us for our shirt as well. If somebody sues us for our shirt we certainly want to win the case and keep our shirt, not to mention our coat. But this is not what Jesus tells us. Again, he showed us what this looks like when he loved, served, and even died for those who rejected him. He gave everything he had. And if someone forces us to go one mile we surely don't want to go a second, but Jesus would - and he tells us to do likewise.

We're used to saying no to people who ask us for help. We try to avoid making eye contact with people begging on the street, pretending like we don't hear or see them. And when we do

encounter them we rarely give. We have many ways of justifying this. We make assumptions about what sort of people they are and what worthless things they'll do with what we give them. We might tell ourselves it's best to do nothing. But Jesus tells us to give to the one who begs and not to refuse from the one who borrows. And he doesn't qualify this. He doesn't tell us to only do this for people who seems worthy, or truly needy, or sober, or anything else. He tells us give and do not refuse. This is a hard teaching. And if this true, then surely we must give to the ones we know are needy.

- 1. Do people in our world practice an “eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth”? Or do they do worse? Why do people seek revenge? What would happen if offenders never suffered punishment for their offenses?<sup>10</sup>**
- 2. Do you usually want revenge? Do you want your enemies to “get what they deserve”?**
- 3. Does Jesus REALLY want us to turn the other cheek, give our coat too, go the extra mile, and not refuse the beggar? And - if so - do we actually think this is good advice? What would our lives look like if we obeyed Jesus? How would our relationships change? How would it build the kingdom of God?**
- 4. Clearly few of us succeed in living as Jesus told us to - why is that? What are the things that prevent us from doing what he told us to do?**
- 5. What does Jesus' own life, death, and resurrection teach us about these commands? How does his example make it easier for us to see and trust in the goodness of his teaching?<sup>11</sup>**
- 6. Do we ever simply want to believe in Jesus without following him as well? Can we truly believe in Jesus without also following him, without doing the things he told us to do?**

## **5:43-48**

When asked what was the greatest commandment, Jesus replied: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40). While Jesus says that the first commandment is indeed the most important, the second one is not far behind.

---

<sup>10</sup> This might not seem like a good way to organize a society, but it's exactly the grace that God extends to sinner through Jesus.

<sup>11</sup> In some ways, Jesus' life makes it harder: he died an early, painful death, and we probably don't want to do the same! But the essential thing is that God raised Jesus from the dead. His life was vindicated. So we can follow him and do the things he taught us to do because we know that, in him, we will be raised to new life as well.

We might think it's ultimately far more important to love God than our neighbor, but it's impossible to love God if we don't also love the neighbor made in God's image.<sup>12</sup>

It's not always easy to love our neighbor; in fact, it's often very hard, and we often fail to do it well, or at all. But Jesus takes this important commandment a step further by telling us to not only love our neighbors but to also love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. This is a surprising turn. The psalms - which Jesus knew better than anyone - are full of requests for God to crush the enemies of the righteous. But Jesus says we should pray for them! Something new really has come. Again, Jesus demonstrates this in his own life by loving, serving, and dying for the ones who rejected him. That's what loving your enemies looks like in action. Like Jesus, we should see that our enemies - like our friends - are sinners made in the image of God. The sun shines and the rain falls on all of us - and we all have the same needs.

Often our relationships are highly calculated. We tend to invest in the relationships from which we think we'll get something in return (fun, food, favors etc), but tend to neglect the people we don't think have much to offer us. And even our charity can often be about making ourselves feel better, not for the sake of the one in need. We are broken people and all of our relationships are broken in some way. And Jesus tells us that we get no reward for loving only those who love us. That's too self-interested, too selfish. Instead, we should love those who don't have anything to offer us, who we don't like or enjoy, who even hates us and will never love us back.<sup>13</sup>

Jesus concludes chapter 5 by saying, "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect."

- 1. Do we have enemies? Why is it hard so hard for us to love them? What would loving our enemies look like? What would it mean to love terrorists, for instance?**
- 2. Does it bother us that "the evil" get the same sun and rain that "the good" do? Do we think that some people do not deserve God's grace? Do we want some people to suffer? What does Jesus want for our enemies?**
- 3. How do we choose the people we love? Do we only love those who love us?**
- 4. How does Jesus' example teach us how to love our enemies?**

## **Additional Questions:**

---

<sup>12</sup> A verse to take seriously: "Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen." (1 John 4:20)

<sup>13</sup> In Luke 14:12-14, Jesus elaborated on the point:

""When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

- 1. What is the hardest teaching in this chapter to obey? What is the most surprising thing Jesus said?**
- 2. What does this chapter teach us about Jesus?**
- 3. What is the kingdom that Jesus proclaims? How would you describe it?**

## Chapter 6

In Matthew 5, Jesus described the higher “law” to which he calls his disciples, the “law” which he fulfilled in his life, the “law” of the kingdom. If we want to know what to do and how to be, Jesus tells us what God wants from us. Jesus tells us with his words but also shows us with his life and death, and he calls us to be his followers, even to be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect.” This new “law” is all about relationships, but in chapter 6 Jesus turns to the individual.

Having shown us what is to be truly righteous, Jesus tells us not to be righteousness in order to be seen by others, for then we have no reward in heaven. He warns us not to take his teaching and turn it into a way of getting gain, of impressing others. It’s possible, Jesus suggests, that we could seek to be perfect in righteousness just to win the praise of people. So in this chapter, Jesus repeatedly reminds us that true righteousness means that we act as if God were the only audience. To be a disciple (as Jesus both told us, then showed us) is to humble yourself - not exalt yourself.

Jesus told us earlier that, together we should we should be like a city on a hill - a city whose light shines such that people see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven. The church doesn’t hide itself; it should be visible for others to see. What Jesus wants to prevent is his disciples, the church, from doing what they do only to be esteemed by the other disciples. He warns against trying to be greatest in the kingdom instead of doing the hard, often inglorious, work of building the kingdom. Jesus - as always - is asking us to take our eyes off ourselves, he’s asking to not be preoccupied with getting ahead. Instead, we should be focused on following him, and he commands his followers to give themselves to others, to be more concerned with others than themselves, and to think of the good of the Body ahead of the individual. When we do the things Jesus told us to do in Matthew 5, we will be like a city on a hill. But it can all be undone if we live for our own glory.

### 6:1-4

So, first he tells us not to draw attention to ourselves when we give to the needy. First, there’s no question that we should give to the needy. The question is how. There are those, Jesus reminds us, that make a show of giving so that others will be impressed. Some people can’t bear the thought of their charity going unnoticed because they want to be praised; they want others to see and remark what good people they are. But that’s all the reward they will ever get. Instead, when we give we should do so in such a way that the right hand doesn’t even know what the left hand is doing. By this Jesus means that our giving should be done unselfconsciously. It should happen naturally as an outflow of our discipleship, almost without even thinking. I think it’s safe to say that it is necessary to consider what we will give and to

plan/budget accordingly - but I also think it's safe to say that Jesus is telling us that it shouldn't be too calculated; we shouldn't be finding excuses not to give. He's already told us earlier in the sermon that we should give to someone who asks. We should always be ready to give without thinking too much, without being preoccupied with who sees us and if we're going to get an earthly reward for our good deed. Instead, we work for a heavenly reward from the Father who sees everything, even what is done in secret.

- 1. Why do we do the things God tells us to do? If we're honest, do we usually seek a heavenly reward? - or and earthly one? Do we know when we're doing one or the other? Should we avoid being praised by others? - or just not seek it? Why is their praise dangerous?**
- 2. How do people in church compete to be the most righteous? How does this harm the Body?**
- 3. How can insure that, when we give, the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing? Do we need to think more - or less - about giving? Does giving come easily? - or is it burdensome? Are we too concerned with a "return on investment?"**
- 4. How did Jesus' own giving (healing, miracles, teaching, etc.) show us what our giving should be like?**

## **6:5-8**

Just as Jesus assumed that we will give to the needy, he assumes that we will pray. Again, it's not a question of "if", but how. And just as with giving, there are those who say prayer in order to be heard by others. Their audience is people, not God. Although we no longer live in a world in which praying aloud on the street corner will win you the praise of others (quite the opposite, probably!), there is, nevertheless, still the temptation to impress other Christians. There are many occasions where we pray out loud: at church, at Bible study, before meals, and so on. When we do this, we are almost always aware that others hear us. Indeed, we pray out loud exactly so that we can join our prayers together. But the knowledge that others are listening can easily make them the audience. Then how easy it is to want others to be impressed with our prayer, to praise us for our eloquence or insight, our fervor or faith. However, our prayers should have audience of one: God.

This is the meaning of Jesus counsel that we should go into the inner room and shut the door, for there the only who can hear and see us is God. Jesus is obviously not suggesting that we only pray when we've found a room where we can shut the door, but rather that, wherever we pray, we should pray as if only God were listening. And, in fact, it might frequently be good for us to find such a secret place, but we should pray always and everywhere.

- 1. Even in our Godless world, is there still a danger of trying to impress others with out prayers? Is the danger possibly even greater? Can we even try to impress ourselves with our own prayers?**
- 2. Why do we pray publicly? Did Jesus pray for others to hear?**

### **3. Under what conditions do you find it best to pray?**

Jesus then tells us not to pile up our words as if God will be overwhelmed by the volume and finally forced to listen. We don't need to get God's attention, explain to God what we're talking about, or persuade God that He should do what we want. God already knows what we need (even better than we do ourselves!) before we even ask.

**4. Do we pray as if God already knows? Or do we heap together lots of words hoping that God something we say moves God**

**5. Are our prayers sometimes too long? Do we say too much? How do we know if we've prayed enough? Should we pray for something once and trust that God has heard? - or do we need to keep praying? Is praying over and over again a sign of great faith? - or a lack of faith? Why?**

## **6:9-15 - The Lord's Prayer**

Having told his disciples how *not* to pray, Jesus teaches them to "pray like this..." What we call "The Lord's Prayer" is undoubtedly one of the best known passages of Scripture - a familiarity that can hide its meaning from us. And, in fact, at certain times and places the words can become an instance of exactly what Jesus warned us against: mindlessly repeating the same thing over again. On the other hand, there is much to be said in favor of repeating this prayer, not least that, by reciting it, we come to know it so well that we internalize it, that what Jesus teaches becomes the way we pray without even thinking. But for just about all of us, the reality lies somewhere in the middle.

That Jesus gave his disciples this pray showed that we do need instruction in how to pray. We don't obviously know how to pray, and all of us learn to pray by listening to others. What better person from whom to learn to pray than Jesus!? He teaches them - and us - this prayer not so much as words to be repeated (although, again, there isa time for that) but as a model for all of our prayers.

Jesus begin his prayer, "Our Father in heaven, holy is your name." Before anything else, we must remember that God is God and is therefore worthy to be praised, his name kept holy. We need constant reminding of who God is - and that we are not God. We often immediately jump to our own wants, making ourselves the subject of prayer. But prayer is ultimately about who God is.

That Jesus calls God "Father" - and not just his father, but our father - reminds us that God is not some distant, disengaged deity, but one who made us in his image and desires to be in relationship with us. At the same time, God is in heaven and is quite unlike us; God is infinite, immaterial, eternal, etc. And yet we can call God "Father" because we are indeed his children and heaven will one day be our home.

But heaven is not just the place we go to be with God when we leave this Earth. Jesus taught us to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." At times, some Christians have made the Gospel only about getting saved and escaping this earth. Jesus



teaches us in this prayer (and throughout the Sermon on the Mount) that, not only does this life on earth matter, but that God wants his kingdom to come here on earth as it is in heaven. God wants this world transformed, restored, and redeemed - and not just us - but all creation. Jesus himself is an answer to this prayer, for he is, in his very person, heaven come to earth. He is the king of the Kingdom, the one who fulfills all righteousness, who is perfect as His heavenly Father is perfect.

When we speak of God's will, we usually think in terms of God's will for us. We want to figure out what God wants us to do, which path to take, which door to walk through. These aren't necessarily bad prayers - often these are good and necessary prayers - but they do tend to place us at the center. We might give God a couple of options to choose from then ask Him to reveal the better one. We might try to find a way to convince ourselves that what God wants is what we want. It's very easy for our will to remain primary even as we seek God's will.

But this prayer invites us to pray first for God's will and then to find our place in his coming kingdom. To be sure, it is God who makes the kingdom come, but this prayer also invites us to join God's work of making heaven come to earth. If we want to God's will for us, it's to be like Jesus.

In truth, Jesus' teaching us to pray for our daily bread doesn't entirely resonate with us because most of us have more than enough of every material thing we need and more than enough of everything we don't need too. Few of us know what it means to be hungry, to wonder when you'll eat again, to have your existence in peril. There are many ways being rich makes it hard to enter the kingdom of God, not least because it's easy for us to forget that we need God at all. We think there's plenty of food at the store which we can buy because we have good jobs because we're smart people. And so we can easily become preoccupied with acquiring things we don't need and enlisting God in our efforts.

Jesus tells us to ask God for our daily bread. There is, obviously, a spiritual dimension to this; Jesus is the bread of life and he offers himself to us. We do need our daily spiritual food. But Jesus mainly means the literal food we need to live. When we ask God to provide for our needs - our needs, not our wants - we are reminded that it is God who is indeed the source of our life, that everything subsists in Him. It's often much easier for us to see what we lack than to keep in focus all that we've been given. We can easily continue to ask God for more and more without being truly thankful for what we already have. Like the Israelites in the wilderness who received manna from heaven but who wanted meat, Jesus teaches us to pray only for what we need and to trust that it is sufficient. If we already have enough bread, we can help those who don't.

Jesus then teaches us to ask God to forgive our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us. Immediately following the Lord's Prayer Jesus adds a bit of commentary on this part: "If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins." This should cause us to sit up and pay attention. Here we have a bit of tension. Does not forgiveness come from grace through faith, apart from anything we might do? But here Jesus seems to put a condition on this, that if we do not forgive, God will not forgive us. God refuses to do for us what we won't do for others, which seems to hold us to a pretty high standard, to insist that we be like God. Our instinct is probably to go right back to grace through faith and tell ourselves that Jesus doesn't really mean what he seems to mean. But we should take Jesus seriously. Whatever the resolution to this tension, it has something to do with this: How we possibly have faith in the God

who, in Christ, forgives, if we refuse to forgive others? How can we possibly receive a grace that we deny others? How can we see that we stand in need forgiveness if we put ourselves in the position of master and judge? The failure to forgive others is basically a denial of the God who forgives us.

Which means an essential part of prayer is forgiving those who have sinned against us. And there are times when, before asking God for forgiveness for our sins, it might be necessary to tell people you've forgiven them. Jesus told us in chapter 5 that it's better to leave your gift at the altar than to attempt worship God unreconciled to a brother or sister. Once we forgive, then we are in position to receive the forgiveness God wants to give. In our world the concept of sin has fallen out of favor. Most think it sounds too judgmental, that people should be free to do whatever they want as long as it doesn't clearly hurt someone else. But Jesus' prayer reminds us that we are indeed sinners and - not only that - we commit particular sins which we need to confess to God, who is faithful to forgive. We always need forgiveness, which means that we should be praying for forgiveness - and granting forgiveness - whenever we pray. That's the example Jesus sets for us.

The prayer concludes with Jesus showing us to ask God to help us avoid temptation and deliver us from evil. Temptations do come, in all sorts of forms, like a wolf in sheep's clothing. None of us have mastered temptation, none of us walk the straight and narrow without a misstep. In fact, believing we care not tempted is its own kind of temptation, a pride which can corrupt us unaware. If we truly pray like Jesus teaches us, we become people who see everything as it is; we see God as God and ourselves as fallen creatures in need of forgiveness, in need of God to provide for our needs. The most basic temptation of all - a temptation which all others are a part - is to worship ourselves, to assume that we deserve and own the gifts we've been given, to assume that we can provide for ourselves, even that we can, in a sense, insure our own salvation. Praying like Jesus teaches us to worship God and God alone, and to see temptations for what they are. Succumbing to temptation is not so much a failure of discipline as it is a failure to see God, ourselves, and all creation as it truly is. It is a failure to worship the only one worthy of worship.

But, of course, we all fall short. We still need deliverance. The deliverance for which Jesus teaches us to pray is in the daily struggle to overcome temptation, but even more in the final deliverance, when indeed Jesus comes again to put an end to death once and for all, when the kingdom does come on earth as it is in heaven. Finally this is the hope to which all of prayers lead, that God, in Christ, will redeem us, strike down the sin that binds us, and set us free.

- 1. Do we need to learn how to pray? Are some people better at praying than others? What makes a prayer good?**
- 2. How do we usually begin our prayers? God has many names and titles - are some better than others? Why does Jesus use Father - and teach us to do the same?**
- 3. When you pray, does God seem near or far away? Beside you or in heaven? Is God more like us or unlike us? Or are all these things true at the same time?**
- 4. Do "your kingdom come" and "your will be done" mean the same thing - or are they different? Do we already know (in general) what God's will is? Is it that the kingdom**

*would come on earth as it is in heaven? This is this first thing Jesus tells us to pray for - just how important is it to him? to us?*

- 5. When we pray, are we seeking our own will or God's will? Do we pay too little attention to Jesus' teaching because we want God's will for our lives to be something different than what Jesus says it is? Has Jesus told and shown us enough? Or do we need/want more?*
- 6. What does "our daily bread" mean for us? Has God already provided everything we need? Do we need to keep asking? Is Jesus teaching us to pray only for what we need - and not more? Do our prayers usually fall into the category of true needs - or wants?*
- 7. When we pray, do we acknowledge that we are sinners in need of forgiveness? Do we confess our sins? Why is confession and forgiveness an essential part of prayer?*
- 8. Will God really refuse to forgive our sins if we do not forgive those who sin against us? Why does God make our forgiveness dependent on us forgiving others? Can we truly believe in Jesus if we refuse to forgive?*
- 9. What are the temptations that we face? Do we attempt to avoid them - and ask God to help us? Or do we like some sins too much to give them up? Does God remove temptation? Or change our desires? Or both? Can we be tempted without even knowing it?*
- 10. What does it mean to be delivered from evil in this world? And in the next?*
- 11. How does Jesus, in his own life, death, and resurrection, answer these prayers? How does praying like Jesus taught us make us more like him?*

## **6:16-21**

Having already addressed giving and prayer, Jesus turns his attention to another spiritual discipline: fasting. For obvious reasons, fasting is not very popular now (if it ever was) and people of our age, especially, are not good at denying themselves anything. But Jesus assumes that his disciples will fast, which means that his disciples *ought* to fast! That's the first lesson. We ought to practice periods of abstaining from certain food, drink, activities, and so on. This, among other things, makes us mindful of our dependence upon God and creates the time and space for prayer. But as before, Jesus instructs his followers not to draw attention to their fasting by making themselves appear to be suffering, by wearing their fasting on their faces. The praise of others is all the reward they will get. Once more Jesus tells us to act for an audience of One, trusting that God sees what is done in secret and will reward us.

On all three subjects (giving, prayer, and fasting) Jesus warns against seeking an earthy, human reward and instead teaches us to wait for a heavenly, divine reward. In verses 19-21 he expands and summarizes this teaching; Jesus instructs us to seek everlasting, imperishable, heavenly treasure - not temporary, corruptible, earthly treasure. Jesus seems to suggest that

we can only seek one of these at a time; their pursuit is mutually exclusive. Jesus makes it obvious which treasure is superior, and yet we need this teaching precisely because we often exert much of our time, energy, resources - our very selves - on possessions and the praise of others. We like these things, and we can have them now. Heavenly treasure requires faith and patience.

- 1. *Why isn't fasting - despite Jesus' teaching - a common practice? Why does Jesus teach us to fast?***
- 2. *How does God reward us for giving, praying, and fasting? Are these rewards here and now? Or later? Will we know when we receive them?***
- 3. *What are some of the ways that we choose earth/others over heaven/God? Why do we seek earthly treasure instead of heavenly? Why do we prefer the praise of others to the praise of God?***
- 4. *How do we know which audience we are performing for? How do we know where our heart truly is?***

## **6:22-23**

This saying sounds strange to our modern ears and it's not immediately evident what Jesus means. This is not the first time, however, that Jesus mentions a lamp. Earlier, in 5:15, he said that no one lights a lamp and places it under a bushel, but rather sets on a stand to give light to the whole house. In that passage, the light of the lamp on a stand is likened to a city that is set on a hill. In both cases, of course, part of the point is that light can be seen - and that light illumines the way for people to see. Without light, we cannot see the way, we stumble, etc. The image of light/darkness is used throughout the Bible, and for good reason.

In this passage Jesus says that our eyes are like a lamp that gives light to the whole body. It is with our eyes that we see the world and everything in it. If our eyes fail then we cannot see the world well but instead see it distorted, falsely, or not at all. Jesus is not speaking literally about whether or not our eyes function properly (after all, most people's eyes work like they're supposed to, and Jesus certainly isn't suggesting that the blind and seeing-impaired are full of darkness!). Instead, Jesus is speaking about eyes metaphorically. With what eyes do we see the world? Do we view it from a human point of view? Or do we see as God sees? The contemporary way of saying this is, through which "lens" do we view the world? For instance, when we encounter people on the street, do we see them as bearers of the image of God? or as bundles of genetically programmed matter? Do we see them as people who have stories to tell and gifts to share? Or do we see them as threats or obstacles? Do we judge them or give them grace? And how do we see ourselves?

If we see only with human eyes, if we view broken humanity only from the perspective of our own brokenness, then will not see well. The light of truth will not illumine the world, and we will be filled with darkness. Jesus remind us that it's possible for to see well - and to see poorly. If

see with God's eyes, we will be full of light. If we see only from a human point of view, we will be full of darkness.

- 1. What are some of the different perspectives or "lenses" through which people (including us) view the world? In what ways are our "eyes" damaged? What prevents us from seeing as God sees?**
- 2. How do we know if we are seeing with sound eyes or not? How do we know if our vision is good?**
- 3. How do we change our perspective on the world? How do we acquire new lenses?**
- 4. What are the consequences of not seeing the world rightly? Can we believe and do as we should if we cannot see the world as it is?**
- 5. Why does Jesus tell us this at this point in the Sermon? What has he been teaching us how to see?**

## **6:24-34**

Jesus begins this passage with a stark contrast, a dramatic either/or with no apparent middle ground: "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 mammon [that is, wealth/money]". Jesus presents it almost as if these are the only two possible masters we can serve. And while most of us would probably admit that we have not fully submitted to the Lordship of Christ, we'd probably also say that, between these two masters, we serve God. But it's still a good idea to ask ourselves just how true this really is. We might be tempted to look around and lament the godlessness of the place we live, but it's worth asking if we're truly serving a different master.

- 1. Are God and Money the only two masters? Does everyone serve one or the other? Is it possible to serve Money a little bit and still serve God?**
- 2. What does it look like to serve God? To serve money? How do the two differ? What do our lives look more like?**
- 3. Do we know which master we serve? Might we think we serve God, but serve something else instead?**

Unless we are entirely devoted to God, it is very easy for us to be anxious about our lives. We might think that by serving Money a little bit that we can make our lives more secure. The disciples on the mountain that day with Jesus knew what it was to go without food, drink, and clothes - and so do many people still today. Jesus told them - and us - not to worry about these things, then says those who do worry have little faith. This might seem a bit harsh. After all, people need food, drink, and clothing. And not only that, they were certainly aware that there

are people who didn't have these things, whose lack didn't just prevent them from living the life they wanted, it prevented them from living at all. People did - and do still - die for lack. Even so, Jesus tells us to look to the birds and the lilies who do not worry and for whom God cares.

The difference between 'the birds and the lilies' and the crowds is that the birds and lilies are not under the illusion that they are in control of their lives. They simply have to take what comes; they do not fail to trust God, as the crowds might. Of course, the birds and the lilies are not as valuable as those made in the image of God, but Jesus reminds the crowds that, like birds and lilies, they are still creatures dependent on God for their lives. No matter how much they worry, however much anxious energy they exert, whatever their striving, they still finally are entirely reliant on God. Those anxious about food, drink, and clothing, have little faith because they fail to see that their lives rest with God. All their worrying adds nothing to their lives. Of course people need food, drink, and clothing - and God know this - and obviously people need to work to make sure they and others have what they need, but Jesus reminds them that they cannot secure their futures no matter how much they accumulate. Better to seek the God who can save us than to seek to save themselves.

To those crowds who knew lack and to us who know abundance, Jesus says the same thing. Our priority must not be striving to make sure our lives turn out the way we want them to. We cannot guarantee our own security, we cannot save ourselves. In fact, such attempts are counter-productive; they only make us anxious and prevent us from seeking the only one who can provide our needs, the only one who can guarantee our security. Jesus tells us that, if we truly want an abundant life, if we want the life for which we were made, the life God intends for us, then we will not be worry about tomorrow, about guaranteeing our future. Instead we will first seek his kingdom and his righteousness and trust that all these others things we worry about will be ours as well.

- 4. *What make us anxious? Is it possible for us to never be anxious? Are there time when anxiety can be good - even necessary?***
- 5. *In what ways are we like the lilies of the field? And in what ways are different? Do we need to work for our needs?***
- 6. *What about people who really do lack what they need? Some people are not taken care of as well as the birds and the lilies - who is to blame? And what does that tell us about God's provision?***
- 7. *Do we seek to secure our futures by making sure we have enough? What does it mean to trust that God will provide? What would Jesus say about retirement plans?***
- 8. *What does it look like to seek first the kingdom and God's righteousness? Can we seek the kingdom and also be anxious?***
- 9. *How did Jesus enact this passage in his life?***

## **Chapter 7**

### **7:1-5**

“Do not judge so that you may not be judged.” This is among the most misunderstood statements by Jesus.<sup>14</sup> In my own experience, I have heard this verse quoted (or perhaps more often misquoted) in situations in which someone was attempting to deflect criticism. In our world it’s easy to enlist Jesus’ words as supporting a kind of moral relativism, as if humans have no grounds on which to question the character or behavior of their fellow humans. But this is not what Jesus is talking about at all.

It’s important - as always - to remember that in the Sermon Jesus is describing the kingdom. He’s addressing the community he has called to follow him. These are not primarily general instructions for every person; they are specifically for those within the church, the Body of Christ. Recall how, in 5:21-26, Jesus said that if we are angry with a brother or sister then we will be liable to judgment. He then stressed the importance of reconciliation between people within the church - and between Christians and those outside the church as well. Jesus is telling us something similar here in chapter 7. Instead of building barriers and creating divisions between each other, in the kingdom there will be reconciliation that leads to unity. When we judge people, we place ourselves on one side and them on the other. We put ourselves on the good side, them on the bad side. Jesus is telling us that we must not do this. If we presume that it’s acceptable for us to judge others, then eventually someone will come along and judge us back. The measure we give will be the measure we get.

With respect to those outside the church, Jesus is counseling his followers not to think they have special privileges because they are disciples, to assume that they get to be in the seat of judgment. To judge non Christians is to separate from them, to withdraw the church from the world. Just as Jesus was in the world, so must his followers be as well.

And besides, Jesus reminds us, we all have our imperfections. How can we presume to highlight another’s fault when we possess a greater, more glaring one ourselves? Most of us are much better at seeing the faults of others than we are at seeing our own. Instead of becoming preoccupied with the sins of others, we should put the priority on dealing with our own sin. In addition to making division where God wants unity, the problem with judging one another is that it is almost inevitably a form of self-exaltation - a way, even, of putting ourselves in the place of God. It’s no coincidence that Jesus uses the image of the eye: it is our own sins that obscure our vision, preventing us from seeing the other clearly.

Jesus is not saying that we should never bring another person’s sin to their attention - hardly! - but we should always do so with humility, in love. There are times when, for the good of the community, it is necessary to confront sin (see again Matt 18:15-20)

- 1. Is our culture too judgmental? Or not judgmental enough? Who gets to make judgments?***
- 2. What does it mean to judge someone? Can we judge a person’s actions without judging the person?***
- 3. Why is it important that people within the church not judge one another?***

---

<sup>14</sup> part of the blame goes to none other than Tupac, whose evasive statement, “Only God can judge me,” has effectively become a popular paraphrase for what (people think) Jesus meant.

4. ***Do we need to take all the specks out of our eye before we can point out the specks in another's eye? When is it appropriate to confront someone's sin? Does our own righteousness give us license to "take the speck out of your neighbor's eye"?***
5. ***How is it different judging people inside and outside of the church?***
6. ***When the kingdom comes, will there still be specks and logs in our eyes?***
7. ***How did Jesus embody these words? Did he judge people?***

## **7:6**

"Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you." This is a strange piece of advice, but we should pay attention lest we be mauled by swine. Surely Jesus is not literally saying that we could be trampled by pigs; Instead, he's obviously speaking in metaphor. But it's hardly obvious what this metaphor means. As is common, in the psalms and elsewhere in the Bible, Jesus repeats the same same saying twice in different ways.<sup>15</sup> In other words, we shouldn't give what is holy/ pearls to dogs/swine. All of these words are highly suggestive - but to what do they refer? Does Jesus have something specific in mind? Or is it general advice? Or both? Interpreters answer these questions in many different ways. I'm not going to try to give an answer myself, though any good answer will pay attention to the context. Jesus' command almost seems out of place with what surrounds it, but then that is unlikely. It's included here for a reason.

1. ***What do we have that is holy, or like a pearl? Is it possessed only by Christians? Are there times when we shouldn't share?***
2. ***We were just told not to judge people... but then how do we say that some are dogs/ swine? Who are the dogs/swine?***
3. ***A friend once cited this verse to say that we shouldn't try to share the Gospel with drunk people? Is this a good interpretation?***
4. ***What does this verse have to do with the kingdom of God?***
5. ***How did Jesus put these verses into action? What did he give away? And when - and to whom - did he refuse to give?***

## **7:7-11**

Jesus tells us that the one who asks receives; the one seeks, finds; the one who knocks has the door opened. After all, even flawed parents are capable of giving good gifts. How much more

---

<sup>15</sup> For instance, Zechariah 9:9 "Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." This is one animal, named twice.



then our perfect heavenly Father? He loves us and he knows what we need. We just have to ask.

This statement echoes what Jesus said earlier in chapter 6 when he told the crowds not to be anxious about what they will eat, drink, or wear, because God already knows what you need. Just as God provides for the lilies and birds, so will he provide for us.

The point of this passage is not that God is some kind of divine genie who grants our wishes if only we ask rightly. This is not a magical formula to get what we want. Instead the point is the same as before: God knows our needs and provides for them. In fact, as Jesus told us earlier, all the time God gives us what we need without us even asking. The sun shines, the rain falls, the plants grow, etc.

It's important to keep the focus on what we truly need and what God wants for us. When he read these words of Jesus, it's easy to start thinking about what we want. We like the idea that God wants to give us these things. But God, like a good parent, is not going to give us whatever we want. In fact, God might not give us what we want exactly because God knows better than we do what we need. These promises Jesus makes pertain to the things that God wants to give us, the things He already knows we need. And, of course, what we need most is God himself. If we truly seek his kingdom and his righteousness then we will indeed, receive it, find it, and the door it will be opened. This is what God wants for us.

1. ***Does God give us gifts even we don't ask? Does God give more to those who who do ask? What happens if we never ask God for anything? Does asking God to provide ever proceed from a lack of faith?***
2. ***Jesus says that God is like our earthly parents, only infinitely better; how much does our relationship with our earthly parents affect our understanding of God the Father?***
3. ***Do we usually ask God for what we need - or what we want? How can we tell the difference?***
4. ***Have you had the experience of asking, seeking, and knocking but without receiving, finding, or having the door opened? What do we make of that? Were we not asking for the right things? Or is there another explanation?***
5. ***What does God want to give us most? What is our greatest need? Do we seek that or not?***
6. ***How did (and does) God's relationship to Jesus - the Father's relationship to the Son - reveal about what kind of gift-giver God is? What did Jesus ask for? And what did he receive?***

## **7:12 - The Golden Rule**

"In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets." The first half of this verse we know well; the second half, probably not so much.

We've heard this repeated often enough that it has probably lost its force; it seems obvious. We just hear Jesus telling us to be nice to other people. Sometimes we can hear these words almost as command not to bother one another, or to give a helping hand when convenient. But Jesus is suggesting something far more transformative. When we hear the Golden Rule, we probably don't imagine ourselves homeless, in prison longing for a visitor, or starving for a meal. But what would we want for ourselves in these situations? Those are the things we should give to others.

And Jesus tells us that you should do to others as you would have them do to you regardless of whether or not the others are going to practice the Golden Rule too. There's standard to be met, no test applied, no sense of reciprocity. We give to others whether or not they have or will ever give to us.

Remarkably, Jesus tells us that this command **"IS** the law and the prophets." He's essentially saying that the entirety of the Old Testament can be summed up in the verse. Everything God required in the law, everything God spoke through the prophets spoke can be fulfilled if we just do this. It's an astounding statement.

Here again Jesus is telling us something about nature of community in the kingdom of God. In the kingdom people will regard the needs of others as important as their own needs - and therefore there will be no needy people.

- 1. *Is "The Golden Rule" a good name for Jesus' command?***
- 2. *When we hear this command, what kind of things do we imagine it requires of us? Do we obey? Why not?***
- 3. *Do we find it easier to practice the Golden Rule toward people who practice it towards us?***
- 4. *How does the Golden Rule sum up the law and the prophets? Where do we see it expressed in the Old Testament?***
- 5. *What would it look like if everyone followed Jesus' command?***
- 6. *How did Jesus himself obey this command?***

## **7:13-14**

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus shares teachings that are hard to obey. Despite that, earlier he told us, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48) and here Jesus tells, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it." This might not sound like Good News, but Jesus is reminding us that being his disciple will be difficult - but not impossible. If we do not

seek the kingdom of God but instead follow the crowds and take the easy way out, we will end up nowhere good. Jesus wants us to be aware of which path we're walking along. From here to the end of the Sermon, Jesus is warning us to be wise and mindful, not naive and foolish.

- 1. Does your experience reflect Jesus' description of life? Is it easier to follow the wrong path? Is following Jesus always the more difficult road?**
- 2. Does this verse mean that God has made it difficult to attain life (and not destruction)? So difficult that most do not find it? If so, why did God not make the path easier to walk?**
- 3. How does Jesus' own life show us what it looks like to take the narrow, difficult road?**

## **7:15-20**

In Jesus' day it was not unusual for a would-be prophet to gain a bit of a following. In his letters, Paul repeatedly warned against false apostles who were preaching a "different" Gospel. There have always been those who distort the truth, sometimes innocently, sometimes in the deliberate pursuit of fame. This is certainly no less true today than it was then. Jesus warned his disciples - and he warns us - to watch out for false prophets. Real - and fake - prophets will be known by their fruits. Of course, many people thought Jesus was a false prophet - and they're judgment appears correct when Jesus hung on the cross.

- 1. What is a prophet?<sup>16</sup> Who are the false prophets in the world today? Is it possible that some popular Christian teachers are actually like wolves in sheep's clothing?**
- 2. What kind of fruit will a real prophet produce? Have you ever been deceived by a false prophet? Does it take time before we see the fruit, good or bad?**
- 3. Why did many people think Jesus was a false prophet? What kind of fruit did he bear demonstrating who he was?**

## **7:21-23**

Jesus gives us another warning, this one even more sobering than the last. Here he tells us that, on the day of judgment, there will be some who cry out "Lord, Lord" but to whom Jesus will declare "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers" - and this despite the fact that they can (rightly?) claim to have prophesied, cast out demons, and done any other deeds in the Lord's name. But only those who do the will of the Father in heaven will enter the kingdom of heaven.

---

<sup>16</sup> A prophet is someone who speaks God's word - often when it is an unpopular truth. This may sometimes (but hardly always) include making predictions about the future, but this is usually in the form of stating the effects that will be produced by certain causes, as in: "If you keep doing X, Y is going to happen."

So surely those of us who think we know Jesus - who think we're walking the narrow path - are meant to examine ourselves. Strange as it seems, even those who've done mighty deeds in the name of the Lord (or, at least, thought they have) will be turned away. But Jesus is not interested in outward appearance or lip service; Jesus is interested in obedience. At the end of the Sermon he is telling us that it is by doing the things he's taught us that we will inherit the kingdom of heaven.

- 1. Can we be too confident in our own righteousness? Can we also be too anxious about our standing before God?***
- 2. Is Jesus more concerned with what we say or what we do? Is it possible to confess Jesus as Lord - even to perform mighty deeds in his name - but fail to know him?***
- 3. Can anyone rightly claim "to do the will of my Father in heaven." Don't we all fail - who then can be approved?***
- 4. Jesus did many mighty deeds, but was that enough? What was the will of the Father for him?***

## **7:24-27**

Here Jesus makes a concluding statement to his Sermon. Here again Jesus presents a dramatic dichotomy, the wise man and the foolish man. The rains and floods will come upon both, but the wise man's house - built upon the rock - will stand, while the foolish man's house - built upon the sand - will collapse. And the point here is clear: we do the things Jesus has taught us in the Sermon - if we seek His kingdom and His righteousness - then our lives will rest upon a solid, unshakeable foundation. We will withstand whatever may come - even the cross itself. But if we ignore Jesus' teaching we run the risk - even the certainty - that everything we have tried to build will come crashing down. We have been warned.

- 1. Does Jesus really mean that there are just two kinds of people with two kinds of "houses"? Are "rock" and "sand" the only foundations? Or might we build our houses upon a bit of each?***
- 2. Do the rains and floods come upon both the wise and foolish? What is our protection from them? Do we imagine God more as one who calms the storm - or one who strengthens our foundation?***
- 3. Do life's storms reveal whether we are wise or foolish? Does the foolish man's house ever stand? Does the wise man's house ever fall? If things fall apart in our lives, does that mean we were foolish? Or does Jesus have in mind something else?***
- 4. How can we know if we are wise or foolish? Fools never think they're fools and the truly wise know better than to assume they're wise. Can we really know if we are wise***

***or foolish? Do we ever finish building the house? Do we keep checking the foundations?***

## **7:28-29**

Jesus' Sermon has finished his Sermon, but Matthew adds a comment:

“Now when Jesus had finished saying all these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.”

We too should be astounded at his teaching, no matter how many times we've heard it before. The simple fact that so few even attempt to take seriously Jesus' teaching (much less succeed in obeying) suggests that we have our doubts if what Jesus teaches us is really - *really* - true. Like the crowds that first heard him, our authorities tell us very different things than what Jesus teaches us. And - if we're honest - we must admit that we find it difficult to believe Him. We've got our own ideas. But still Jesus' invitation stands: “Come follow me.”