
Sermon on the Mount

13 Lesson Adult Bible Study

Created by Leslie S. Chapman

For Northside Church of Christ

Summer, 2000

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Matthew 5-7

INTRODUCTION

A mother asks, “What else can I do? Our son is sixteen. He is failing school. He does not mind. He is constantly getting into trouble. And my husband and I do not know where to turn.”

The phone rings, “I have a problem and I need help. My husband and I separated about a year ago. We recently decided to try to reconcile our differences. But one problem will not go away. I want to talk about it, but he will not listen. I am afraid divorce is the only solution.”

These are but two of the thousands of problems of living in the twentieth century. Pornography, sexual immorality, alcohol, drug abuse, abortion, and divorce are every day encounters of Christians as well as those of the world. It seems that society has lost its underpinnings. We are like a great ship without an anchor. In the mad rush for liberation and freedom, it may be that we have lost our sense of direction. WHERE ARE WE GOING?

Society has freed itself from “out dated” social traditions, “puritanical” moral regulations, and “unfair” economic conditions to find itself free—free from everything except sorrows, pain, guilt and meaningless existence that parch our souls and drain our spirits.

With the threat of international terrorism, nuclear holocaust, and economic disaster, modern man needs something to hold on to—a meaningful way to live. May I suggest an answer? *THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT!*

E. Stanley Jones has correctly written, “The greatest need of modern Christianity is the rediscovery of the Sermon on the Mount as the only practical way to live.” It is in these three chapters of Matthew’s gospel that Jesus sets out the supreme goal of life—“*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect*” (Mt. 5:48).

If you seriously study this sermon while examining your own life, you will experience one of two reactions. You may respond as did those of whom Jesus said, “*Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not bear or understand*” and you may never realize the need of God’s guidance in your life. Or you may respond as have millions—humbled, aware of your own deep sinfulness, and determined with the help of God to change your life into the image of Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:29). But one thing is certain: *YOU WILL NEVER BE THE SAME!*

SUGGESTIONS FOR YOUR STUDY

As you study these lessons from chapters five, six, and seven of Matthew, several guidelines will be helpful.

- (1) Approach this study in a prayerful and serious manner! Ask God for wisdom and a humble heart as you approach his Word. “*Pray continually*” and “*Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.*”

- (2) Be opened-minded! Spiritual growth is only possible when you are willing to open your mind and heart to hear God’s word afresh. In Christianity, everything must be open to study and investigation. Each truth must be rediscovered by each succeeding generation if Christianity is to flourish. Peter admonished, “***But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.***”
- (3) Remember the contexts! Sound and faithful Bible study requires that you first study the passage in its original contexts to ascertain what Jesus was saying to those Galilean Jews in his day. This is followed by an examination of the context from which Matthew wrote the Gospel to the church in his day. After this, appropriate application can then be made to Christians today.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT AND MATTHEW'S PURPOSE

It is essential to understand some of Matthew’s reasons for including this sermon in his Gospel. Matthew is commonly acknowledged as the most Jewish of the four Gospels. Its purpose was to present Jesus as the Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham, the Savior of the world (Mt. 1: 1, 21).

The apostle was likely writing to a Jewish church that was struggling with its new faith and, more particularly, how that faith related to the Old Covenant and those still clinging to it. Was the Law still valid? Were the Pharisees and Scribes the “faithful” heirs of Moses? Was Jesus of Nazareth the fulfillment of the Law and Prophets, God’s final authority, the true “Messiah” for which Israel had longed? And how was this faith to be transformed into everyday life? These questions and more must have been on the minds of Jewish Christians of the first century.

The Sermon on the Mount plays an important role in the development of Matthew’s theme. In this section, Jesus is presented as the fulfillment of the Law of Moses. Notice in particular 5:17, “***Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.***” Jesus became the Law and the Prophets in human form—the final authority for all that we say and do.

A second reason for this sermon’s inclusion is its strong denunciation and condemnation of the Pharisaical/legalistic approach to God. Throughout the book, Jesus is presented in sharp contrast to the Pharisees. In almost every chapter, Matthew makes either a direct statement or an allusion to the sinful ways of this Jewish sect. The references culminate in Jesus’ scathing condemnation in chapter 23. The Sermon on the Mount becomes a revealing contrast between the ways of Jesus and those of the Pharisees. “***For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven***” (Mt. 5:20).

A third purpose for this material is its effective summary of Jesus’ teachings. Matthew seems to have arranged his material for easy usage in the instructing of new converts about the life of Jesus. Systematic groupings of material can be found on Jesus’ teachings, miracles, parables and the doctrine of Final Things. The Sermon on the Mount is the first and most extensive of five discourses which summarize Jesus’ preaching and teaching during his earthly ministry. All five end with the phrases “***When Jesus had finished...***” (Mt. 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1).

BACKGROUND TO THE SERMON

The first four chapters of Matthew introduce the book and set the stage for Jesus’ sermon. Like Luke’s Gospel, Matthew opens with the genealogy of Jesus and the birth narrative. Chapter two ends with Joseph and Mary taking the young child to the Galilean village of Nazareth where they make their home.

Chapter three begins abruptly with the introduction of John the Baptist and his preaching in the Judean desert. Unlike Luke, Matthew is silent on those years between the family’s settlement in Nazareth

and Jesus' baptism by the Baptist. John's teachings, the Lord's baptism, and Satan's temptations are given in concise, chronological succession in 3:1-4:11.

The remainder of chapter four (verses 12-25) provides the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount. In these few verses, Matthew "sets the stage" for 5:1ff. First, he introduces the speaker, "***From that time on Jesus began to preach . . .***" (Mt. 4:17).

He then introduces the chosen disciples, "***As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew . . . 'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will make you fishers of men.' At once they left their nets and followed him***" (Mt. 4:18-20).

Thirdly, he explains the presence of the crowds: "***Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the Kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him***" (Mt. 4:23-25). Matthew has now prepared his readers for their encounter with the incarnate WORD OF GOD.

THE MOUNTAIN SETTING

"Now when he saw the crowds..." (Mt. 5:1). Large crowds seemed to be a frequent companion of Jesus, at least during his early ministry (Jn. 6:66). People of all walks of life, from varied backgrounds and for many different reasons, gathered to hear this prophet from Galilee.

Some came with the sick, diseased and demon-possessed to be healed by this miracle-worker. Others, with dreams of a restored Israel, came hoping that in Jesus they would find the long awaited Messiah who would deliver Israel from the bondage of Rome. The Pharisees, Sadducees and political leaders in Jerusalem sent representatives to inquire who Jesus was and what he was doing. And no doubt many came merely to see the man about whom everyone everywhere was talking. Likely people from all these groups were present that day as Jesus sat down to teach.

"He went up on a Mountainside and sat down" (Mt. 5:1). Where did Jesus present this lesson? Many have tried to identify the particular mountain such as the Mount of Beatitudes or Mount Tabor. But most believe the text would be better translated "hill country" instead of "mountain" since this area is actually made up of rolling hills instead of large mountains.

Jesus often retired to the hills to rest and pray. After feeding the five thousand and the attempt to take him by force and make him king, he went up into the hills to pray to his Father (Mt. 14:23). The feeding of the four thousand and the choosing of the twelve both took place in the hills (Mt. 15:29; Mk. 3:13), and it was upon the "Mount of Transfiguration" that Jesus revealed his glory to those three disciples who were his closest friends (Mt. 17:1). It, therefore, seems the appropriate location to deliver these great principles of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Twice in Matthew's gospel Jesus is seated as he teaches the people (Mt. 5:1; 13:1-2). This was the common method Rabbis used in teaching and Jesus appears to have followed their custom. An interesting example of this practice is found in Luke 4:16-30, when Jesus entered the synagogue in Nazareth and taught the people.

"His disciple came to him..." (Mt. 5:1). The focus of the Sermon on the Mount is toward the disciples instead of the crowds. Although the multitudes heard the lesson and responded to it (7:28), it is the immediate circle of followers that Jesus addresses. Who were among that number is difficult to answer. Surely those of the twelve who had already been chosen were present. But it likely included many others, possibly the women who followed Jesus and helped minister to his needs (Lk. 8:2,3).

"And he began to teach them..." (Mt. 5:2). This phrase is a formal statement preparing the reader for the following teachings. Jesus had already begun preaching (4:17); now Matthew introduces that teaching to his audience.

With these two verses as an immediate introduction, the Sermon on the Mount begins. It is my prayer that you will humbly and seriously examine your own lives as we prepare to learn to “*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the philosophies of life upon which people build their lives?
2. What is the supreme goal of life as given by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount?
3. What does it mean to be open-minded in a study of the Bible?
4. Why is the context of a passage important in Bible study?
5. List three purposes for the Gospel of Matthew?
6. Why were people drawn to Jesus in his day and why are they drawn today?
7. To whom was the Sermon on the Mount directed?
8. Please read the entire Sermon on the Mount and write down what you believe to be its primary emphasis.

CHRISTIAN CHARACTER - SCENE ONE

Matthew 5:3-13

INTRODUCTION

The Sermon on the Mount begins where it really counts—with the individual's character. Christianity strives not only to change one's actions, but the source of those actions: the *HEART!* In the opening remarks of his lesson, Jesus set forth the proper character of those who would be his disciples. But Jesus not only preached these virtues; he practiced them in his life. If one desires to follow the Lord, his life must first be a reflection of the Master's.

The first twelve verses of Matthew five are usually called the "Beatitudes," taken from the word "blessed" which begins most of the verses. Jesus introduced his lesson with the road to true happiness and joy. But the source of this joy is not from the outside; it originates in the heart. The word translated "blessed" means "divine joy or happiness" and is used often in the Psalms to describe the joy that comes only from God (i.e. Ps. 1:1). The happiness God gives is independent of circumstances or possessions. It flows from the heart totally controlled by the Lord.

"BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT"

Jesus begins, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5:3). The first prerequisite of one who would follow Christ is a "poor spirit." The word "poor" denotes someone totally destitute with no one to turn to but God. This person realizes that he is nothing and turns to God with a "broken and contrite heart" (Ps. 51:17). But this poverty is not the result of outside factors; it is SELF-MADE! Jesus demands that we give up everything, including ourselves, if we would be his disciple, "*If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, and his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple*" (Lk. 14:26). Jesus, more than anyone else, demonstrated this virtue by giving up eternity's heaven to come to earth and give his life a ransom for many (Phil. 2:6-7).

"... *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*" The result of such sacrifice is eternal life, a place in the kingdom of Heaven. Matthew seems to replace the more common phrase "kingdom of God" with "kingdom of Heaven" in deference to his Jewish brethren (The Jews did not pronounce the name of God—Yahweh or Jehovah). It is significant that the Beatitudes both begin and end with the "kingdom of Heaven." Everything else takes a distant second when compared to God's rule in our lives. Only by giving up the one real possession we have—ourselves—can we find real life in Jesus Christ.

"BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN"

Jesus continues, "*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted*" (Mt. 5:4). We live in a cold and callused world where very few really care; but out of the darkness should shine the Christian who is touched by the sorrows and cares of others. Sometimes people think that giving up self means giving up the spirit that is touched by the pains of others, but this is not so for the true disciple of Jesus. We mourn both for the sins and weaknesses in our own lives as well as the sins and weaknesses of others.

In the first beatitude, we join Jesus in renouncing “self;” in the second we join his on the road to Calvary to die for others. Jesus felt keenly the weaknesses and struggles of others. He took time to talk to an outcast Samaritan woman at a well (Jn. 4:7ff.); he defended an adulteress against those of impure motives (Jn. 8:1ff.); he even befriended tax-collectors and sinners, although it cost him his reputation. We, too, must bear our brother’s sorrows, **“Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ”** (Gal. 6:1-2).

“... for they will be comforted.” When a person truly cares and mourns for the struggles of others, his own problems fall into perspective. They are no longer the giant that needs slaying. We find true comfort when we extend comfort to others (2 Cor. 1:3-4). The apostle Paul could rejoice in a Roman prison because of his love and concern for those churches for which he had suffered (Phil. 1:3-6). We become more like our Heavenly Father when we mourn for the lost of the world as He does (Jn. 3:16).

“BLESSED ARE THE MEEK”

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Mt. 5:5). Meekness is often looked upon as weakness, but such is foreign to the Biblical concept. Moses was known as a man of meekness (Num. 12:3), but Moses was anything but weak. Meekness can be defined as “strength under control.” It is the same term used to describe the taming of a wild horse—power under control. When Jesus stood before Pilate, he manifested the POWER of meekness, **“Where do you come from?” he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. ‘Do you refuse to speak to me?’ Pilate said. ‘Don’t you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?’ Jesus answered, ‘You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above’**” (Jn. 19:8-11). A Christian must manifest strength, but only under God’s control.

“... for they will inherit the earth.” Renouncing self, caring for others, and being meek leads one to become a servant—the true rulers of the world. When once asked who was the greatest, Jesus replied, **“If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all”** (Mk. 9:35).

CONCLUSION

These three beatitudes might be summarized with the spiritually poor inheriting the Kingdom of Heaven, the mournful inheriting inner peace and joy, and the meek inheriting the earth—the spiritual, the mental, and the physical worlds. Only as we give all do we truly gain all (2 Cor. 6:10).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. With whom does the Sermon on the Mount begin? Why?
2. What are the first twelve verses of Matthew 5 usually called?
3. What does the word “blessed” mean?
4. From where does true happiness originate?

5. What is the meaning of “poor in spirit”?
6. What is the reward of the poor in spirit?
7. For whom are we to mourn?
8. How does mourning for others bring comfort to ourselves?
9. What is the definition of “meek”?
10. In what sense do the meek inherit the earth?

CHRISTIAN CHARACTER - SCENE TWO

Matthew 5:3-13

INTRODUCTION

The goal “*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect*” (2 Cor. 13:11) is rooted in the beatitudes. These nine “Blesseds” depict the personal character God wants all of us to possess and which Jesus illustrated throughout his life. They are the only path one can follow and find true happiness.

As we studied in our last lesson, the Christian journey begins with a realization of one’s total dependence upon God (the poor in spirit). This leads one to godly sorrow for his sins and the saddened plight of others (those who mourn) resulting in a life completely under God’s control (the meek). In this lesson we will examine the next three beatitudes and their respective role in leading us unto “perfection.”

“BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER AND THIRST...”

Jesus continues his discourse, “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled*” (Mt. 5:6). The next step of the Christian pilgrimage is a hungering desire to be filled with the righteousness of God. If godly perfection is our goal, then we must put God and His righteousness first and foremost in our lives. Jesus uses the strong terms “hunger” and “thirst” to describe the desire we must have. To us this has very little meaning since we know very little about true hunger or thirst. Desire is not enough; we must passionately long for “righteousness” more than anything else in our lives.

“Righteousness” means more in this verse than a simple desire to know the will of God. It is a longing to transform our lives into the image of Jesus himself who is our righteousness (Rom. 5:17)—to become the embodiment of God’s will through obedience to our Lord’s will. But it even goes beyond our lives; it seeks to extend God’s goodness into the lives of those around us who may not enjoy such. Ours must be a desire to seek righteousness to the extent that we are even willing to be persecuted in our pursuit (Mt. 5:10).

The result of this dedication: “... *for they will be filled.*” We will see God’s righteousness slowly developing in our lives. It may take considerable time, but improvement will be seen. H. G. Wells once said, “A man may be a bad musician and yet be passionately in love with music.” Likewise, righteousness may be a struggle, but the passion for such will keep one on the quest.

But let us beware of false righteousness. Nothing is more beautiful and pleasing than righteousness; but nothing is more hideous and offensive than self-righteousness. God forbid that we ever develop the attitude of the Pharisee (Lk. 18:10-14) who boasted of HIS righteousness and good deeds independent of God’s grace and righteousness which can only come through Jesus Christ.

“BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL”

The fifth beatitude reads, “*Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy*” (Mt. 5:7). Righteousness and mercy go together like a hand and glove. Righteousness must be tempered by mercy or it will turn hard, unloving and Pharisaical. But mercy must be conditioned by righteousness or it

becomes loose and mushy.

Mercy is the ability to feel the pain and sorrow of others. It is a feeling of compassion and gentleness that lifts the weak and downtrodden. God extended the greatest mercy of all when He sent His only Son to live and walk with us; and, then, to die so that our sins might be washed away (Heb. 4:15; Rom. 5:8). Throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus extending mercy by healing the sick, raising the dead, feeding the hungry and forgiving the sinful. Time and again, Jesus conditioned our receiving mercy by our showing mercy (Mt. 6:14,15; Gal. 6:7). James wrote, “*Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that give freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful*” (James 2:12-13).

“BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART”

When one has the ability to blend righteousness with mercy, love with obedience, and faith with works, he has reached the sixth beatitude, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Mt. 5:8). It is so difficult to create within ourselves a pure heart—a heart free from wrong motives, bad attitudes and evil desires. The pure in heart is the person who sees everything in the light of God’s will and desire. In Ps. 24:4-6 the Psalmist declares that one must have clean hands and a pure heart to enter in the sanctuary to worship. And it is there that one feels the presence of God (Ps. 17:15). It is the servant who, after his work is finished, realizes that he has only done what was expected of him as a slave of the Lord. Paul illustrates it well, “*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me*” (Gal. 2:20). Our perfect example of one pure in heart was Jesus—“*For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me*” (Jn. 6:38). Such should be the goal of each of us and our fervent prayer to God (Ps. 51:10).

Of the “*pure in heart*” Jesus promised: “*they will see God.*” The person who is undivided in his loyalties, who can seek righteousness but extend mercy, and who seeks God's will above all else, he is the one who truly sees and understands the Father.

CONCLUSION

With these six character traits behind us, we are now ready to truly serve the Master. In our next lesson we will look at the WORK that leads to true happiness.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do the first three beatitudes go together?
2. How do the fourth through sixth beatitudes relate to each other?
3. To what extent should one desire righteousness?
4. What is righteousness?

5. What danger is there in seeking righteousness?
6. Why must mercy be tempered with righteousness?
7. What is mercy?
8. What is contingent on our showing others mercy?
9. Why is becoming pure in heart so difficult?
10. How does the pure in heart see God?

CHRISTIAN CHARACTER - SCENE THREE

Matthew 5:3-13

INTRODUCTION

In baptism, man is placed in Christ (Rom. 6:3-5), but in the beatitudes Christ is placed in man. It is not enough to become a Christian; one must also become CHRIST-LIKE. The challenge of Jesus' sermon is to become perfect like our heavenly Father; but this is accomplished by becoming like our perfect example—the earthly Christ.

The final three beatitudes lead one to the ultimate blessedness—serving, suffering and rejoicing with our Lord. Several decades later, Peter shared the same thoughts with his hearers, “*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ . . . If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name*” (1 Peter 4:12-16). The church today needs desperately to learn how to share in the suffering and joy of our Lord!

“BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS”

The sixth beatitude challenged us to be pure in heart; but purity is not maintained by building a wall around ourselves. Instead, purity leads us to be peacemakers between God and man and between man and his fellow man. Notice carefully that this “divine happiness” doesn't come from being peaceful, but from being a peaceMAKER. It involves an active participation in the Great Commission of Christ—the one source of true peace.

The Bible often portrays God as a “God of Peace.” And the prophecies of the Old Testament described the coming Messiah as the “Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6; Zech. 9:9-10). Is there any wonder that God calls us to peace as well?

But the peace to which Christ calls us involves more than just the absence of conflict. The Jews greeted one another with the phrase “shalom” which is translated “peace.” It was a prayer that God would grant spiritual “wholeness” to one's neighbor. To this greeting, the Christians added “grace” (Eph. 1:2), for only through God's grace can we find true peace. It is this ideal that Christ calls us to promote. Like the “merciful,” we seek peace because we have experienced peace in our relationship with Jesus. Christians, therefore, have a responsibility to be peacemakers: (1) between God and ourselves, (2) between sinners and God, (3) between our own brethren in Christ, and (4) between anyone who has a conflict with another person.

“... *for they will be called the sons of God.*” The King James Version translates this verse by using the words “children of God.” But the term is masculine and means “sons.” The word “son” was used to designate a person who portrayed the very character of his father. Christians have a duty to be like our Father as we share His peacemaking message with the world. E. Stanley Jones wrote, “It is not written merely in the commands of Jesus to go and share, it is written in the very constitution and make-up of the Christian soul.”

“BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTE”

If we choose to be a peacemaker, ironically we choose also to be persecuted. The Christian’s life shines as a great light in a very dark world. But light exposes those in darkness and persecution is the result. Paul in writing about such said, “*For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him*” (Phil. 1:29). Persecution comes in a variety of forms. One doesn’t have to be physically harmed to be persecuted. In fact, most of our persecution will be in the form of verbal abuse, cutting remarks or ostracizing from family or friends. But we must be careful that our persecution is the result of righteousness, and not some type of pseudo-righteousness. There are no blessings in being persecuted because of unkindness, ugliness and a critical, judgmental attitude. Let us rejoice in persecution, but for the right reasons. As Jesus brought reconciliation on a cross, we can only bring peace by bearing our own crosses. Jesus promised, “...*for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*” Heaven only belongs to the poor in spirit, as they become the persecuted peacemakers.

“BLESSED ARE YOU WHEN PEOPLE INSULT YOU ...”

Jesus finally drives home his point by directing the last beatitude straight at us—“*Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.*” He broadens the persecution to include not only physical acts, but insults, slander and lies. And He replaces righteousness with Himself. But isn't Jesus the living example of what true righteousness is?

Only Jesus can take persecution and pain and turn it into joy and happiness. When we see life from that perspective, what is left to defeat us? What a joy to know that we travel down the same road as the great martyrs of old and are able to share in the very suffering of our Lord. Only now can we understand what Paul meant as we wrote from prison, “*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*” (Phil. 4:4).

The reward of God for this final beatitude is two fold, “... *because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*” Christians store up treasures in heaven and are compared to the great prophets of old—what more could we ask?

CONCLUSION

Modern man begins with self-sufficiency, depends on his own power, and ends in ruin and disillusionment. Christians begin by denying self, turning to God and end with joy and gladness. May each of us determine to do as the old song says, “Let Him Have His Way With Thee.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is God satisfied with a person’s just becoming a Christian?
2. To what example of perfection does the Christian look?
3. Does the seventh beatitude bless the peaceful person?

4. What four areas does the Christian strive to bring peace?
5. What is significant about the term “sons of God”?
6. Besides the command of Jesus, what prompts the Christian to teach others?
7. Why should the Christian expect persecution?
8. What are some wrong reasons for being persecuted?
9. How are Christians primarily persecuted today?
10. What two blessings can we expect for being persecuted for Christ?

CHRISTIAN INFLUENCE AND THE LAW

Matthew 5:13-20

INTRODUCTION

A cartoon which has been in several church bulletins shows a “Christian” businessman talking to two other Christians and the caption reads, “My boss would fire me in a minute if he knew that I’m a Christian ... Luckily, I’ve been able to keep it a secret.” Although humorous in some ways, it also sadly depicts the attitude of many so-called Christians. We need to realize that it is IMPOSSIBLE to incorporate the beatitudes of Matthew 5 and not have a changing effect on those around us—the Christian faith CANNOT be practiced in splendid isolation.

As we saw last week, the life of the Christian naturally brings opposition from many in the world. But as the world’s persecution affects Christians, the Christian life also affects the world. In verses 13-16 Jesus gives two metaphors that demonstrate the influences Christians should have on the world.

“YOU ARE THE SALT OF THE EARTH”

The first metaphor used by Jesus to describe the Christian life was SALT—“*You are the salt of the earth*” (Matt. 5:13). Salt had both religious and secular usages in Biblical times. Covenants in the Old Testament were sealed with salt. In fact, salt became a reminder of the covenant one had made with God (Num. 18:19; 2 Chron. 13:5). Salt was also used as an indispensable part of both grain offerings and incense. Later, it was a symbol of both purity and holiness (Lev. 2:13; Ex. 30:35). Disciples of Christ are walking demonstrations of both the New Covenant and the new type of sacrifice God demands of His children (Rom. 12:1-2; Heb. 8:7-13).

Salt was also used in secular society as both a preservative and seasoning. It was so valuable that wages were sometimes paid in salt (“Salary” was the money given Roman soldiers to buy salt, hence “worth his salt”). In both instances, its influence was quiet and widespread. The Christian life alone is a powerful influence for good in our world.

First, salt is a preservative that prevents decay and rot. Christians are to be the preservative of society against the rotting effects of sin. Throughout society there should be a definite difference between the life of Christians and that of the world. “How shameful if sin is as brass and reckless in our presence as in our absence.” Is it easier for people to be good around you or does it really matter? Think about it!

Secondly, salt adds flavor to food. “What the soul is to the body, the Christian is to the world.” People are looking for meaning in life. Can we, by our influence, say that life without Christ is nothing, empty and void? One writer has correctly stated, “Oftentimes the rejection of religion is not because of the wickedness of men, but because of the worthlessness of religion.” Our lives should manifest the words of Christ, “*I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full*” (Jn. 10:10)

But we must beware of self-deception. Jesus continued, “*But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything ...*” A Christian with no influence is as valuable as “saltless salt.” He has become a “fool” (the literal meaning of the Greek—“moron”) and is destined for judgment.

“YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD”

Not only is the Christian to be like salt—silent, pervasive, unseen—his life is to be a shining light of what God would have all men to be. When Jesus came, he brought light into the world, “***While I am in the world, I am the light of the world***” (John 9:5). Now that our Lord has returned to God, we are to reflect his glory before the world.

The Old Testament is filled with references connecting the coming Kingdom with “light.” Disciples of the kingdom would “***walk in the light of the Lord***” (Isa. 2:2-5) as they became a light unto the nations to bring “***salvation to the ends of the earth***” (Isa. 49:1-6).

Light does two things: it shows the way one is to go, and it reveals what was once in darkness. As Christians, we must show the way. Jesus described it further, “***A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house***” (Matt. 5:14,15). As Christians, we must not allow anything—whether sin, shame or fear—to hide the presence of God’s love and light. One author wrote, “A life elevated above its surroundings cannot help but be elevating.” As Jesus continued, “***In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven***” (Matt. 5:16).

“DO NOT THINK THAT I HAVE COME TO ABOLISH”

Why had Jesus come? This question was of primary concern to the Pharisees and Sadducees of Jesus’ day. Was it to show the errors of the old covenant? The Messiah would have the authority to establish a “new covenant.” Had Jesus, therefore come to condemn the law of God given at Sinai as worthless and weak? Not at all! Paul wrote, “***What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law***” (Rom. 7:7). Instead Jesus had come to keep and fulfill the law perfectly that through his death we might have eternal life. “***I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them,***” Jesus said. Not one dot of the “i,” or cross on a “t” would pass until all had been accomplished. But there is the conditional statement implying that once “everything” had been fulfilled a new, world order would be established. In John 19:30 as Jesus hung from the cross he stated, “***It is finished***” and with that he gave up his spirit having accomplished all God had sent him to do. After his resurrection, Jesus reminded his disciples that he had come to “fulfill” what had been written about him (Luke 24:44) and, having fulfilled it, he established his covenant as it had been predicted through the prophets (Mt. 26:28; Heb. 8).

Jesus further stated that one’s place in the kingdom would be determined by his approach to the law: “***Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven***” (Mt. 5:19). A person’s respect for God can be easily seen by the way he approaches God’s Word. One who took lightly God’s Word probably would take lightly Jesus’ sacrifice for his sins, while one who was devoted to God’s commandments would most likely accept Jesus as his savior.

But our righteousness must not be like that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law; for they sought to obey the letter of the law but violated completely its spirit. They saw themselves as “righteous” because of what they had done, not because of God’s grace and mercy (Rom. 10:3-4). If one is to enter the kingdom of heaven, he must obey not only the outward requirements, but his obedience must originate from the heart. Today, the church is challenged like never before to condemn Pharisaism and to oppose its legalistic approach to Christ. “***Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.***”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What cannot be practiced in “splendid isolation”?
2. What two metaphors does Jesus use to describe the Christian influence?
3. In what ways was salt used in Bible times?
4. How is the Christian a preservative of society?
5. How can one lose his saltiness?
6. What is the purpose of light?
7. Who is the real light of the world?
8. Why was the law given?
9. In one sense Jesus came to take away the law. In another, he came to fulfill it. How do you reconcile the differences?
10. How would you define Pharisaism and how much of a problem do you think the church has with it?

THE HEART OF THE ISSUE

Matthew 5:21-48

INTRODUCTION

In Matthew 5:20, Jesus gave a choice for one who would be his disciple, ***“For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”*** The righteousness to which Jesus is referring is not our righteousness before God, for that comes only through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:21-22), but rather our “right” living with one another and our “right” relationship with His commandments. It is not enough to keep the law outwardly; one’s heart, soul and mind must keep it also. Only a true love of God—heart, soul and mind—will motivate one to true obedience to God’s commandments (John 14:15). In verses 21-48, Jesus gave six examples of areas the Jews often kept the law in letter, but violated it in the spirit. Such could not be true of those who followed the Lord.

In each of the six blocks of material Jesus did two things: (1) pointed out the mistaken concept, and (2) went to the heart of the issue. The Lord began each section with the same general formula, ***“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago ... But I tell you ...”*** (5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44). Jesus explained that the objective of Moses’ commands was the “intent” of the heart in relationship to God and to other people. It was this “intent” that the Pharisees had lost in their legalistic approach to scripture.

“DO NOT MURDER”

Jesus began, ***“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment’”*** (Matt. 5:21). The first misconception Jesus corrected involved the sixth commandment against murder. Moses had commanded that anyone who took a life be tried, and if found guilty of murder, be stoned. But murder was in reality only the end result of the real crime committed. Jesus stated that anyone who treats another person with disrespect whether by anger, slander, prejudice or contempt was really guilty of the same infraction. Christians must treat all people for what they are—individuals created in the image of God and in need of salvation. Anything less is a denial of the name we wear.

The Lord followed his instructions with two suggestions for correcting broken relationships. First, before worshiping God, make sure no one has a complaint against you. If someone does, you should go and make it right or else your worship is in vain. You cannot be right with God while at odds with your brother (1 John 4:20). And, second, whenever a problem does arise, ***“settle matters quickly.”*** As Paul commanded, ***“In your anger do not sin: do not let the sun go down while you are still angry”*** (Eph. 4:26). Anger left unchecked develops into hatred and it is hatred that leads to murder.

“DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY”

For his second example, Jesus moved to the seventh of the Ten Commandments which condemned “adultery.” He began, ***“You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery’”*** (Matt. 5:27). Jesus once again focused in on the “heart” of the matter, ***“But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart”*** (Mt. 5:28). It is not adultery

that destroys marriages. Instead, it is the evil desires of the heart that undermine the marriage bond, leading to its ultimate demise.

Jesus is not condemning here the natural attraction between man and woman. Instead, it is the lustful desire that says “I wish I could commit adultery with him/her!” Everyone is attracted from time to time to someone of the opposite sex, but the wrong is committed when we dwell on it until it develops into willful lust. Martin Luther once stated, “No one can keep the birds from lighting in the branches of your mind, but you can sure keep them from building a nest there.”

The cure Jesus proposed has caused many to think the Lord to be too severe. But sin, if it is to be controlled, must be dealt with severely. Paul used these words, “***Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry***” (Col. 3:5). If something tempts us to sin, only two things can be done: (1) remove the object from our sight, or (2) elevate ourselves so the temptation doesn’t exist.

“ANYONE WHO DIVORCES HIS WIFE”

“***It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce’***” (Mt. 5:31). This exception had been given to the Jews because of the hardness of their hearts (Dt. 24:1-4; Mt. 19:8). But like the two previous commandments, they had taken advantage of God’s grace. Some of the teachers of the law had gone so far as to permit divorce for something as trivial as burning the supper. Such was completely alien to God’s intentions.

Jesus returned to the law given in the beginning that prohibited divorce with the one exception of “fornication.” When one takes marriage lightly, he not only endangers his own soul, he also endangers his ex-wife’s and anyone she might marry (Mt. 5:32). Marriage is serious business and it is time we realize that the marriage bond is a covenant bond not to be taken lightly or broken without the serious breach of “fornication” by one’s mate.

“DO NOT BREAK YOUR OATH”

The fourth example dealt with honesty and truthfulness, “***Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord’***” (Mt. 5:33). The Jews had violated the spirit of this law to the point of absurdity. God had strictly warned not to “***swear falsely by my name ...***” (Lev. 19:12). But the Jews found ways to make oaths that they could break depending upon whom or what they had pledged their oath (See Mt. 23:16-22). Jesus brushed aside the confusion with the simple command, “Be honest! Be truthful in everything you do.” The Christian must be above any claims of dishonesty.

“EYE FOR EYE, AND TOOTH FOR TOOTH”

In the fifth example Jesus revised the Old Testament law of “***an eye for an eye***” (Ex. 21:24ff.) because it had been interpreted as an excuse to carry out revenge. “***You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.***”

Many have misunderstood what Jesus meant in this passage. For instance, if we take Jesus

literally in reference to “*resist not evil*,” do we not create a contradiction with James who urged us to “*Resist the devil*” (James 4:7)? Jesus is here referring to personal insult and persecution. The Christian must accept persecution as “sufferings with Jesus.” We must go the second mile because God went the second mile for us.

“LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR, AND HATE YOUR ENEMY”

With the final illustration Jesus drove home his new philosophy. Moses had commanded Israel to “Love your neighbor” (Lev. 19:18). The Pharisees had taken “neighbor” as being inclusive; therefore, allowing one to hate his enemies. But once again, such had not been the intent of God’s law.

Of all relationships, showing love for one’s enemy is probably the hardest. But such is demanded by our Lord and by his own example (Luke 23:34). Only by rightly treating EVERYONE with due respect can we be “*perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.*”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. To what did Jesus compare his teachings?
2. What is the meaning of “Raca” and why is such severe punishment pronounced on the one who uses it wrongly?
3. Are “You fool!” the only words that will endanger one’s soul?
4. Does God accept our worship if a brother has something against us?
5. Does Jesus literally mean “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away”?
6. Why is “fornication” the one exception for divorce?
7. Could a Christian take an oath in a court of law?
8. What does turning the other cheek mean?
9. Should one give to everyone who asks of him?
10. What does it mean to “Love your enemies”?

WHITED TOMBS AND SEPULCHERS

Matthew 6:1-18

INTRODUCTION

At the end of chapter five, Jesus challenged us to “*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*” But he immediately follows this goal with a warning, “Be careful not to do you ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven” (Mt. 6:1). Jesus had just addressed “true righteousness” as it effected our relationships to one another. Now he directs our attention to “true righteousness” in our relationship to God. It seems that the greater the demand for holiness, the greater the danger of hypocrisy. The dream of godly perfection before the Heavenly Father can easily turn into a quest for external righteousness and honor before our fellow man (Gal. 1:10).

Jesus illustrated his point by focusing on abuses of the three main acts of Jewish piety: giving, prayer and fasting. In each instance Jesus began with the accusation “hypocrite.” He then exposed the abuse, announced the hypocrite’s reward and, finally, described the true nature of worship. Jesus taught that the mere “appearance of religion” without substance would rob one of heaven’s reward and ultimately consume all the righteousness and purity in one’s spiritual life. As one author stated, “Many ‘Christians’ are better Pharisees than they are Christians.”

“SO WHEN YOU GIVE TO THE NEEDY”

When the Law was given to Moses, the Lord made provisions for those in need. In Deuteronomy 24:19-22 Moses stated, “*When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow ...*” The same commandments applied for the wheat fields and grape vines along with certain tithes that were to be given to help those in need (Dt. 14:29). God wanted provisions made for the poor.

But as we have already seen, some Jews had turned the mercy of God into an advertisement for SELF, “So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do ...” (Mt. 6:2). During New Testament times, Feast Days, Fasts, and special meetings were inaugurated with the blowing of trumpets. These events were often accompanied by special contributions to the needy and the hypocrite would use the occasion to give large sums so that the poor could witness how “kind” and “generous” he really was. But such pseudo-piety is grounded more in one’s ego than any desire to help the needy.

Jesus stated that such an individual would receive what he desired—the praise of men—but that would be all (he was “paid in full”). Instead, “*When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing*” (Mt. 6:3). In other words, beware even of “secret pride.” Our righteousness should be to please God only, nothing more. True giving begins with the giving of ourselves (2 Cor. 8:5). The result will be a reward from God in the Day of Judgment.

“AND WHEN YOU PRAY”

A second “DISPLAY OF POMP” for the hypocrite was public prayer. The Jews had a custom where they set aside three specific hours of the day for prayer. In Acts 3, Peter and John are on their way to the temple “at the time of prayer” when they healed the man crippled from birth. But the hypocrites would often delay in leaving for the synagogue or temple so as to have to pray on the street when the trumpet was sounded, in full view of everyone. **“I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full”** said Jesus. There would be no praise from God, only from deceived men.

But what about our prayers? Do we use all the appropriate phrases, proper statements, acceptable language and well-pitched voices to please God, or win approval of brethren? Is prayer a platform from which we preach instead of pray? We must be extremely careful that our prayers are truly addressed to God and not intended as grandeur for the audience. Instead, **“when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen”** (Matt. 6:6). How much do you pray in private? Public prayer should be an overflow of private prayer!

“THIS, THEN, IS HOW YOU SHOULD PRAY”

What should our prayers be like? Jesus warned of being like the Gentiles who believed their many words would insure their being heard by the gods (See 1 Kings 18:26-29). Ecclesiastes 5:2 warns us, **“Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.”** Let us follow our Lord’s example and let our prayers be in simple faith, **“for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”**

Jesus illustrated the nature and content that should characterize our prayer-life. **“This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.’”** In Luke’s Gospel, this prayer is given in response to a request from the disciples for Jesus to teach them how to pray. The model prayer may be divided into *praises to God* and *petitions to God*.

How ironic that the very abuse about which Jesus was warning has been most frequently committed using the very model he gave us. The “Lord’s Prayer” is probably the most abused prayer ever uttered. Let’s not make that mistake. For our prayer to be a genuine act of righteousness, it should be without pomp or show, directed to God and not men, primarily private and without vain words and repetitions.

“WHEN YOU FAST”

Fasting was a common practice in Jesus’ day. Beside the national fasts dictated by the Mosaic Law, many fasted individually to control one’s individual appetites and to draw closer to God. But what had begun as a spiritual act of self-discipline degenerated into a proud act of self-righteousness. How many of us do the same thing by the clothes we wear, the comments we make or even the Bibles we read. We must always be careful that in suppressing the physical, we don’t express the “OLD MAN” in pride and pomp.

Conclusion

We need to realize that there is a vast difference in doing good works “before men” (Mt. 5:16), and doing them to be “seen of men.” If our religious service is done to be seen of men, the act will die at the moment it is done—there will be no lasting effect. May our service be always directed toward God, *“And your Father, who sees what is done in secret, WILL REWARD YOU.”*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What did Jesus say after challenging us to be perfect like the Father?
2. The greater the demand for holiness, the greater the danger of what?
3. How did God provide for those in need in the Old Testament?
4. What causes a person to give in a hypocritical way?
5. What is meant by “do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing”?
6. What was the purpose of the Lord’s prayer?
7. How do people today pray in vain?
8. What are the requirements for acceptable prayer?
9. What was the purpose for fasting?
10. Should Christians fast today?

WHO IS YOUR MASTER?

Matthew 6:19-24

INTRODUCTION

In chapter six of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus turned his disciples' attention to two "life-rules" of the Kingdom of Heaven. In the last lesson, it was noted that the disciples of Christ must be pure and honest in their religious service to God. Their piety must be free of religious hypocrisy and performed only to please the heavenly Father. Jesus now turns to the disciples' relationship to the material world and, especially, the role wealth should play in the Christian's life.

It has always been a problem for the Christian to balance a spiritual life in a material world. It is so easy to either become an ascetic with an evil view of that which God has made (Col. 2:21-22), or else to become a materialist with God and spiritual matters becoming crowded out (1 Tim. 6:17). In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus identified the "thorny soil" as one who is obedient to the word, "**but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful**" (Mt. 13:22). The overriding question each of us must ask ourselves as we study this section is "To WHOM or WHAT do we dedicate our lives?"

"TREASURES IN HEAVEN"

Jesus began by stating, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal" (Matt. 6:19). Jesus most likely is picturing here the wealthy farmer with fine clothes, barns of grain, and treasures of gold and silver. Perhaps he was recalling scenes of his childhood and the rich farmers of Galilee. Inside the rich man's closets, the moths are slowly destroying his clothes, the bugs are quietly eating away his grain, while thieves are secretly breaking into his house and stealing his gold and silver.

Jesus is not condemning here the acquiring or saving of wealth. Throughout the Bible, wealth is often seen in the hands of God's people (for example, Job and Abraham). Instead, the key phrase is "for YOURSELVES." What should be the purpose of material blessings for the Christian? Should it not be to serve and glorify the Lord God? Money and wealth are good, but only if used for the appropriate reasons. Paul warned, "**He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need**" (Eph. 4:28). Anytime we catch ourselves laying up money to gain power, to gain prominence, to satisfy a desire for show, or anything designed to promote SELF, we tread on dangerous ground. It is a dangerous belief that once a person gives a tenth or slightly above, he is then free to use the remainder for HIMSELF. The line is not drawn at the tenth, twentieth or even fiftieth, but at the point we began laying up for selfish purposes instead of using it to serve God and His cause. When Paul was urging the Corinthians to remember the poor saints of Judea, he reminded them of the generosity of the Macedonians. "**And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will**" (2 Cor. 8:5). We will overcome the slavery of materialism when we realize that God is the one who truly owns everything, including ourselves. As the Psalmist wrote, "**For every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills**" (Psa. 50:10).

"**But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also**" (Mt. 6:20-21). Instead of loyalty to material objects, Jesus encouraged the laying up of treasures in a spiritual

way. When we give to bless others—time, service, money, etc.—we lay up for ourselves treasures in Heaven (Mt. 19:21). Heaven, and the One who lives there, must be the object of our devotion. For in the end, only that which is spiritual will survive.

Jesus understood one clear principle—“***For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.***” The things we treasure govern our entire being; it consumes our time, planning, goals, energies and efforts. God demands that He be the object of that devotion. Anything (wealth, popularity, pleasure, sports, work, etc.) can become evil if it becomes an ultimate value to us, usurping the place of God. We must realize that we move towards that which we fix our eyes upon (Heb. 12:1-2).

“THE EYE IS THE LAMP OF THE BODY”

Jesus continued his thoughts with a couple of statements that have caused considerable problems in interpretation, “***The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!***” (Mt. 6:22-23). Jesus used the eyes as a means of illustrating his point. The eyes are the source of light for man. Only when we can see clearly can we journey without falling. Jesus seems to be saying that unless one is completely clear on his decision to follow Him, he will fail in his endeavor. There is an old saying, "There are none so blind as they who will not see." So many people simply are dulled or completely blinded by the allurements of materialism. They simply cannot see God and how He wants them to live. And in Jesus' words, “***how great is that darkness.***”

“NO ONE CAN SERVE TWO MASTERS”

Jesus finished with a verse we all have heard, “***No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money***” (Matt. 6:24). As humans, we often think we can walk the fence or as some say, “Have our cake and eat it, too!” But we only fool ourselves. For inside the temple of the heart, all of us have made a choice and our knees have bowed. A sad reflection of today's values was seen when I once asked some Christian teenagers, “If you could wish for one thing, for what would you wish?” One young lady said, “Money!” When I asked why, the teenager replied, “Because then you can buy everything else you want!”

I wish all of us could have the spirit of Matthew Henry. When he had discovered that he had been robbed, Henry wrote in his diary, “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.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the two extremes one can go in relationship to the material world?
2. What is it that Jesus is condemning in Matthew 6:19?

3. Where there any rich, righteous people in the Bible? Who?
4. How should we view the material blessings we receive?
5. What happens to earthly wealth?
6. How can you determine what is important to a person?
7. How did Jesus illustrate his point?
8. Why is money such a danger to people?
9. Are there any parables that warn of the danger of wealth?
10. From where did the belief—You can buy anything you want with money—come?

WORRY, WORRY, GO AWAY!

Matthew 6:25-34

INTRODUCTION

If the love of money and worship of material things can destroy the soul of the rich, so can worry and unfounded anxiety destroy the soul of the poor. Jesus realized that the poor man's goal for perfection could be as easily diverted by worldly motives as that of the rich. Whether rich or poor, young or old, black or white, or any other distinction, nothing must be allowed to turn us away from our aim ***“to be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”***

As one approaches this text, he must realize what Jesus meant by “do not worry.” There are things a Christian **MUST** be concerned about if he is to be responsible before God. But there is a *spirit of worry* that is irresponsible and sinful. Paul wrote, ***“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God”*** (Phil. 4:6). To help clarify the point, notice Webster's definitions of two key words: *concern*—something of importance to one; *worry*—a troubled state of mind, uneasiness. God expects us to show concern, but not to the point of a troubled mind crippled by needless anxiety.

“DO NOT WORRY ABOUT YOUR LIFE”

Jesus began by saying, ***“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear”*** (Mt. 6:25). Jesus' tone seems to change as he turned from warning those who would trust in riches to comforting those who “worried” from day to day about what they would eat or wear. Physical needs are important, but they must not be allowed to replace God as the first priority in our lives. Likewise, as the rich were not to store up for “themselves” treasures upon the earth, neither must the poor depend upon “themselves” for daily provisions of life. Few things can destroy one's faith quicker than diverting it from spiritual matters to a host of little “worries.”

Jesus asked, ***“Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?”*** (Mt. 6:25). If God loved us enough to give us life and a physical body, would it not seem reasonable that He would take care of the needs of that life and body. Jesus is not here implying that work and physical labor are not a part of God's means of providing. Paul clearly taught that ***“If a man will not work, he shall not eat”*** (2 Thess. 3:10). Likewise, a believer who does not provide for his own family is deemed worse than an infidel (1 Tim. 5:8). However, after we have prepared, planned and worked for the necessities of life, we must then turn to God and leave the rest up to Him.

“THE BIRDS OF THE AIR AND LILIES OF THE FIELD”

To explain his point Jesus chose two seemingly unimportant things in life—the birds and flowers—and showed God's wonderful care for them. ***“Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ... See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these”*** (Mt. 6:26-29). If the birds do not sow, reap or lay up for the future, yet our God lovingly cares for them, will He abandon His own children who do?

Christians need to realize who is in CONTROL! We do not live in a world of chance. Instead, a wise and loving Father is in complete control. And if that God takes care of the little things like birds and flowers, how much more will He take care of the one creature made in His own image. Too many of us are correctly described by Jesus' words, "***O you of little faith***" (Mt. 6:30).

In view of life's worries, Jesus asked an important question, "***Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?***" (Mt. 6:27). There is no power in worry, especially in those areas that we cannot change. No matter how much worry, work and energy we may exert, some things are simply beyond our control. In such areas we must trust God and go on.

"SEEK FIRST HIS KINGDOM AND HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS"

Jesus constantly showed the difference between one who would be his disciple and the pagans of the world. This difference must also be manifest in regards to the concerns of life. The body and its needs are important, but they must not come before God and His kingdom, "***But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well***" (Matt. 6:33). God promises to take care of our NEEDS if we put him first in our lives. The problem arises when we confuse our needs with our wants. So many professing "Christians" have been led away by the "Health and Wealth Gospel." It is the philosophy that God wants His children to be both physically and materially "healthy" in this life. It is the philosophy of many of the TV evangelists and in reality, only they end up wealthy.

In the final analysis, we have only one real need—GOD. Persecution may take away our food, strip us of our clothes and even take our physical life away, but if we have God, we still have EVERYTHING. How desperately we need to understand this.

"THEREFORE DO NOT WORRY"

Until now Jesus had been reasoning from a theological standpoint, now he turns to real life, "***Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own***" (Matt. 6:34). Jesus calls us to dismiss the failures and regrets of yesterday, to cease our worrying and fretting for tomorrow and to live life one day at a time content in the reality that we are children of God.

We must seek God and His will first and foremost in our lives. All of our energies must be concentrated on how to better serve and show our God's love while it is still "TODAY!"

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. To what does Jesus turn his attention after warning about wealth?
2. What is the difference between a "worry" and a "concern"?
3. Why is worrying so wrong?
4. Since God gave us life and body, what else should we expect?

5. What two things does Jesus use to explain his point?
6. To whom does Jesus compare the flowers of the field?
7. How does Jesus describe people who worry?
8. What are some things worries could never change?
9. What should come first in a person's life?
10. How should a Christian approach each day?

SHALL WE JUDGE?

Matthew 7:1-6

INTRODUCTION

Of all of the commandments of our Lord, hardly any are more consistently broken, neglected, or misunderstood as his commandment: “**Do not judge**” (Mt. 7:1). Jesus had prepared the groundwork for this command with his earlier instructions regarding, “mercy,” “loving ones enemies,” and “forgiving others that God might forgive us.”

It seems that it is human nature to point out the faults of others. In so doing, we seek to pat ourselves on the back and lift ourselves up by criticizing and cutting others down. When someone says, “See how BAD HE IS!” he really says, “Look how GOOD I AM!”

We become critical and judgmental when we seek to justify ourselves through legalism or when our own spiritual life begins to weaken and deteriorate. It has been correctly said, “When religious people begin backsliding, they begin backbiting.” The critic hopes that by pointing out the errors of others, he can somehow deflect attention from his own sins and shortcomings.

The ultimate tragedy comes when we become completely unaware of our own hypocrisy. The Pharisee never saw himself as a critic and faultfinder. He was the “righteous defender of orthodoxy!” But sadly he had become the “sincere, sinful hypocrite!”

“DO NOT JUDGE”

“Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (Mt. 7:1,2). The same principle is evident here that was evident at the beginning of chapter six—the more righteous our goal, the more dangerous our tendency to become judgmental. The meaning of the word “judge,” as used here by Jesus, is that critical and condemning spirit that sees faults in others while being blinded to the faults of one's own life. This individual shows contempt with those different from himself and attributes insincerity to everyone else but himself (See Lk. 18:9-14). It is the same spirit that prompted Paul to write, **“Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another”** (Rom. 14:13).

All of us make judgments all the time. Jesus is not prohibiting here the normal decision-making processes of the mind; neither is he condemning the spiritual discernment necessary to preach the Gospel to the lost. Instead, he is addressing the critical, faultfinding attitude that tries to build itself up by cutting others down. Such must be foreign to the character of Jesus' disciples. Instead the Christian will see the best in others, **“Love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres”** (1 Cor. 13:6-7).

When we decide to judge, we make ourselves open candidates for the criticisms and judgments of others. As Jesus had said before, the way you treat others will be the way others treat you (5:7; 6:14-15). Paul gave a principle that is always true, **“Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows”** (Gal. 6:7).

“WHY DO YOU LOOK AT THE SPECK”

To illustrate his point, Jesus depicted a situation which is very familiar, **“Why do you look at the**

speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye" (Matt. 7:3,4). It would seem impossible for such a situation to exist, but it happens all the time in this area of judging. Others' faults seem to stand out while our own are but minor difficulties. Especially disturbing is the tendency to see moral sins as less serious than doctrinal sins. One has no right to self-righteously condemn another for a doctrinal manner when he is not doing anything about moral violations in his own life. King David was furious over the story Nathan told him of the rich man stealing his neighbor's only lamb only to discover that he, King David, was the rich thief (2 Sam. 12:1-7).

It is only after we have made corrections in our own lives that we can "assist" in cleaning up the lives of others. ***"You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye"*** (Mt. 7:5). The only avenue to an effective "helping" of others is by a demonstration of self-criticism in ones own life. There is nothing wrong with wanting to help others when done in a loving, humble way after due confession and freeing of ourselves of sins as equal or worse. Paul wrote, ***"Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted"*** (Gal. 6:1). The more we know ourselves and acknowledge our own weaknesses, the more we can love and help others with theirs.

"DO NOT GIVE DOGS WHAT IS SACRED"

Jesus immediately follows with a strange statement, ***"Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces"*** (Mt. 7:6). Jesus seems to be doing what he had done earlier—lay down a principle and then give its converse danger. Although the Christian is to love his enemies, do good to all, and refrain from a critical, judgmental attitude, he is not to become wishy-washy, throw judgment to the wind, and refuse to take a stand anywhere. There are those people in the world that are so evil as to be described as pigs and dogs by our Lord. These individuals must not be allowed to profane that which is holy (See Acts 13:9-10). As a holy people, Christians must not prostitute themselves with certain types of people; instead, we must by our holy lives, be as ones crying in the wilderness against the sinful condition of the world.

CONCLUSION

It is so easy to confess the sins of others, but much more difficult to face and confess our own sins. If we would please our heavenly Father we must turn our criticisms inwardly and there develop a light from which others can see God and change and correct their own lives.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do people want to criticize and find fault in others?
2. What is the ultimate tragedy concerning judging?
3. How would you define the word "judge"?

4. Where else in the New Testament is judging condemned?
5. What does a person invite when he judges others?
6. How did Jesus illustrate his point about judging?
7. What Old Testament character was guilty of judging others when he was the one who was guilty?
8. When does a person have a right to “judge” his brother?
9. What is meant by Matthew 7:6?
10. How can we best influence the lives of others?

FATHER, I'M LEAVING IT UP TO YOU!

Matthew 7:7-12

INTRODUCTION

Thus far in our study of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has challenged us to “*be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*” He wants us to have the character described in the Beatitudes—to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, to beware of the righteousness of the Pharisees and to be careful that our righteous acts are done to be seen of God and not men. He has also warned us of trusting in uncertain riches, worrying about the troubles of life, and judging our brothers in a self-righteous way.

Most of us are ready to throw up our hands and cry, “It’s too much, I can’t do it!” But Jesus, at just the right time, tells us how we can make it. If we seek to do it all by ourselves, we just as well give up, for none of us will ever make it all alone. But God doesn’t demand that we struggle alone; instead, He offers His grace and power to help us make it through. Paul wrote, “*I can do everything through him who gives me strength*” (Phil. 4:13). We too can do it if we know the SOURCE of our strength!

ASK AND IT WILL BE GIVEN TO YOU

If the church has failed in any area to restore the practices of the New Testament church, it is right here with PRAYER! We have been deceived by our modern world to deny much of the power of prayer. We pray with the attitude that “What will be, will be!” and expect nothing to REALLY happen as a result of our petitions and requests to God. And when nothing does happen because of our lack of faith (James 1:6-7), it only re-enforces our belief that prayer is powerless. But Jesus demands a different philosophy from His disciples as he gives us this incredible promise, “*Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened*” (Mt. 7:7-8). Do we really believe it?

Three terms are used by Jesus to describe the zeal with which we are to approach our Heavenly Father—ask, seek, and knock. Each term denotes a further phase of our struggle. We first ask, then we go out and diligently seek, and finally we approach the door boldly and knock (Heb. 4:16). Ours must be an active search for God’s will in our lives. Sometimes God wants us to move beyond the “asking” stage to the searching stage. Sometimes we have to knock strong and loud on those “closed” doors before they will open. God has not promised us a “MasterCard” with unlimited credit, but he has promised to answer us when we seek him with all our heart. And the promise is “*For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.*”

Someone may ask, “Does God always answer His children's prayers?” Yes, but it may not be the way we want them answered. It has been correctly said that God answers prayers in three ways: “Yes,” “No” and “Not right now!” God knows what's best and will answer accordingly.

Therefore, if you lack the qualities Jesus demands, then ask for help to obtain them. So often we do not have simply because we do not ask (James 4:2b-3).

“WHICH OF YOU, IF HIS SON ASKS FOR BREAD”

To illustrate His point, Jesus used the simple father/son relationship here on earth. He stated, ***“Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?”*** (Mt. 7:9-10). Bread and fish were the common food for those who lived around the Sea of Galilee. Twice, Jesus fed thousands with the small loaves the women baked and with fish from the Galilean Sea. As earthly fathers, we try to give the best to our children. My mom and dad often stated that they were better off than their parents were and they hoped their children would be better of than they were. Such is the love parents have for their children. Only a lunatic would abuse a child as Jesus describes.

“If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (Matt. 7:11). If sinful man can give good gifts to his children, would not God give even more? But again the key words are ***“to those who ask him!”***

“SO IN EVERYTHING, DO TO OTHERS AS ...”

To sum up everything He had said concerning our relationship to others, Jesus commanded, ***“So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets”*** (Mt. 7:12). It is not accidental that Jesus began by demanding a righteousness that transcended that of the scribes and Pharisees, one that responded to God’s laws as they were intended originally. Now Jesus summarizes how such is accomplished—by observing the “Golden Rule.”

It is interesting that in this passage, the Golden Rule is given as the summation of the Old Testament law. In Matthew 22:37-40, it is obedience to these two commands: ***“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”*** Yet, there is no contradiction in these two summaries. For to love your neighbor as yourself is to treat him like you would want to be treated.

The negative form of the Golden Rule had been preached centuries before Jesus’ coming. It stated, “Do not do to others what you would not want done to you!” But there is a vast difference in the negative form as opposed to the positive statement. It is not enough in life not to do certain things to others. The question Jesus asks is “What will you do for others that you would want others to do for you?” Jesus’ command surely includes the negative form, but it goes one step farther.

To obey this principle, one must have the ability to divorce himself from his own desires, wants, pains and hurts, and to project himself into the desires, wants, pains and hurts of others. God did it for us when He sent Jesus to live like us—to have wants, desires, pains and temptations, and finally to die for us on the cross. If Jesus did that for us, should we do any less for others. No other commandment sets forth our relationship to others in such a simple and convicting way. We may cry out, “But that’s impossible to obey!” In our “ME” generation, the Golden Rule does seem obsolete; but with God’s assistance, it can make a great difference in our world. Our challenge is to obey it!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Where does one find the strength to live the Christian life?
2. What is the general attitude of people concerning prayer?

3. What three words did Jesus use to make his point about prayer?
4. How do these terms build upon one another?
5. Does God always answer His children's prayers?
6. What is the number one reason many do not have anything?
7. What two foods does Jesus use in His illustration?
8. How can the Christian receive good gifts from God?
9. What is the negative form of the Golden Rule?
10. What other commandments sum up the Law and the Prophets?

THE PATHWAY TO REAL LIVING

Matthew 7:13-23

INTRODUCTION

In Matthew 7:12, Jesus began summarizing his great Sermon on the Mount. In relationship to others, we must choose between the Golden Rule or satisfying our own lusts; in relationship to God, we must choose between His way or man's way. No one will enter heaven because they barely made it. We either CHOOSE to be saved or we ALLOW ourselves to be eternally lost.

Many people want to straddle the fence with one foot in the world and the other in the church. It is falsely believed that as long as you're not too bad, you'll be O.K. Just attend services every now and then, partake of the Lord's Supper when you can, and contribute occasionally, and in the Judgment Day, Jesus will welcome you in with open arms. NOTHING could be farther from the truth!

“ENTER THROUGH THE NARROW GATE”

Jesus offers one way to salvation and only one way, ***“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it”*** (Mt. 7:13-14). Jesus uses a familiar Old Testament concept to describe the two responses to his call of discipleship. The Psalmist, almost a thousand years earlier, had talked about the two WAYS, ***“For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish”*** (Psa. 1:6).

God's way is not a wide interstate with broad lanes which makes it easy to travel. There is nothing easy about being poor in spirit, loving your enemies, living righteously, treating others like you want to be treated, or seeking to be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect. Neither is there room for us to choose our own way. Paul described the failure of the Jews of his day in rejecting God's way, ***“For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness”*** (Rom. 10:2-3). If we would be followers of Jesus, we must be willing to travel the narrow and difficult road of self-denial and total dedication to God and His will. Nothing less will be accepted.

Neither is this road just accidentally discovered. The majority of people are depicted as merrily going on their way unaware of the destruction that awaits them at the end of their journey, while the narrow road is traveled only if one first “FINDS” it. There is nothing required to travel the broad road. In fact, you can travel it out of default. But diligent search is necessary if one will find God's way. As the Hebrew author wrote, ***“... he rewards those who earnestly seek”*** (Heb. 11:6). Beware of the way of the world, for it is the way of sure destruction.

What does the disciple find at the end of his journey? ***“But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to LIFE, and only a few find it.”*** The end result is Life. Heaven is surely included in the final analysis, but Jesus is primarily describing the blessings of this world. Sin, lust, and blind ambitions only lead to disillusionment and misery, or as Jesus described—DESTRUCTION. It is only when we lose ourselves in Jesus, that we find what REAL LIVING is all about. ***“Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent”*** (John 17:3).

“WATCH OUT FOR FALSE PROPHETS”

If a danger exists in finding the right way, it also exists in being led astray. Jesus said of the Pharisees, “***You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are***” (Mt. 23:15). Just because one claims to follow God doesn't mean he actually does. Therefore Jesus warned, “***Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves***” (Mt. 7:15). We must be careful about those who claim to be proclaimers of God's will when in fact they are not. Some may come as “faithful” and “sound” gospel preachers, but in reality they seek a following after themselves. Paul warned the Ephesians elders of such individuals (Acts 20:29-31).

Jesus warned that we could avoid such if we would do two things. First we must be careful fruit inspectors, “***By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them***” (Mt. 7:16-20). Thorns sometimes produce a little black berry that resembles a grape and thistles have a blossom that resembles a fig and from afar they may deceive you, but closer examination reveals the fraud. The sure way to detect a fraud is by his fruit. In the case of the Christian, one should first look for those fruits evidenced by the work of God's Spirit in our lives (Gal. 5:22-23). Evangelists, elders, deacons, or anyone claiming to follow Christ is a fraud if he preaches one thing while practicing something totally different.

“NOT EVERYONE WHO SAYS TO ME”

Secondly, what is it that makes a person a true follower of Jesus? It is not what some people think, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’” (Mt. 7:21-23). We can perform all kinds of “righteous deeds,” have all kinds of “Bible knowledge,” and claim complete loyalty to the Lord as evidenced by great “miraculous signs,” but if we do not KNOW him—or are KNOWN by him—it is all in vain. The important question in the Judgment Day will not be “How many works have you done?” but “How have you responded to the will of the Father?”

Paul wrote, “***If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing***” (1 Cor. 13:2). The Sermon on the Mount aims at the heart and soul of man and says “If we don't change the inner man, all else is in vain!”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is meant by the statement, “You can't back into heaven by backing out of hell?”
2. Why would people want to straddle the fence between the world and the church?
3. What are the two ways Jesus said one can choose to travel?

4. What word is used to teach that one doesn't travel the narrow road by accident?
5. List several things difficult about choosing God's way?
6. What does Jesus mean by the narrow road leading to "Life"?
7. What did the Pharisees make of their converts?
8. Why would someone want to deceive others?
9. What fruits should we look for in the true disciple's life?
10. What else, besides good works, is demanded of the Christian?

UPON WHAT SHALL WE BUILD?

Matthew 7:24-29

INTRODUCTION

As Jesus draws his sermon to a close, he summarizes his entire message with one simple question: “Upon what will you build your life?” Our Lord has given us the greatest challenge in this world. Now he wants to know how we are going to react to it. Will we pass it by as insignificant Bible verses? Or will we drink of it deeply, open our hearts and minds to His will, and REALLY strive to “*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect*” (Mt. 5:48).

For twelve lessons we have examined the greatest sermon recorded of our Lord’s. He has called upon us to change our inner character, the way we treat others and how we look at the world with its wealth and worries. He has called us to loyal service as his disciples. Now he demands a verdict. What will your answer be to his call?

“LIKE A WISE MAN”

“*Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock*” (Mt. 7:24). Unlike the “old covenant” where God’s law found embodiment in tablets of stone, the “new covenant” finds its embodiment in the person of Jesus Christ. Wise is the person who understands who Jesus is and accepts what he teaches as truth! Jesus once said, “*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*” (Jn. 14:6). We need to understand that Jesus is the one who created us, who sustains us and who knows everything about us. Doesn’t it seem reasonable that he also knows what is best for us?

Our Lord did not come to give us a list of rules and regulations that are intended to make us miserable and unhappy. Instead, he came to teach us how to live and have REAL LIFE. “*I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full*” (Jn. 10:10). It is found only in Jesus! As His disciples, we MUST gain a greater knowledge of just who our Lord was and what he has done for us.

But what is the benefit of such devotion? “*The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock*” (Mt. 7:25). We can build our lives on many foundations, but what happens when life tumbles in? Where do we go when a loved one dies, when a marriage breaks up, when a child goes astray, or when we wake up one morning and there is no meaning in life anymore? It is only in Jesus Christ that we can find the help to make it through the storms of life. The words stand out so boldly, “**YET IT DID NOT FALL.**” Jesus did not promise us a life without problems, only the help to overcome them. Let come what may upon the life built upon Jesus, it will withstand it all. “*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us*” (Rom. 8:35-37). This is REAL VICTORY!

“LIKE A FOOLISH MAN”

To the rest Jesus gives a solemn warning, “***But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash***” (Mt. 7:26-27). Tragedy awaits all those who try to build on anything other than Jesus Christ. People build their lives on so many things—money, pleasures, knowledge, other people, etc. But when life is all over and done, everything except Jesus is but sinking sand.

As Christians we might read this passage and think “all’s well” for us. But Jesus stated clearly what is expected from all who would follow him, “... ***who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice*** ...” It is not enough to claim loyalty to Jesus, we must manifest it by the kind of life we live—Are we obeying his commandments? Are you changing your inner being? Are you treating others as you want to be treated? Are you putting his kingdom first in your life? These are the questions we all must answer!

“***And it fell with a great crash.***” Nothing is more tragic than a life wasted in sin. So many people live their lives only to die and never be missed. A few years ago I attended a funeral of a man whose wife didn’t even have time to go to the cemetery (She had tickets to the local wrestling matches).

The end of a life not built upon Jesus is A GREAT CRASH! But such doesn’t have to be the end. Once more, what will your answer be to his call?

“WHEN JESUS HAD FINISHED”

The reaction to Jesus’ lesson by the crowd was AMAZEMENT. Never had a Rabbi taught the people in such a way; there was something definitely different about this Jesus of Nazareth. “***When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law***” (Mt. 7:28-29). Matthew sets out clearly in his Gospel to establish the “authority” of Jesus. For the Jews, the Law of Moses, the Pharisees and scribes, and the Temple had been the sources of spiritual authority; but with the coming of Jesus, all authority in heaven and upon the earth now resides in him (Mt. 28:18).

The scribes had taught the people about the rules and regulations of the Law of Moses with the emphasis on the rules and regulations. Jesus taught the people the “whys” of the rules and regulations with the emphasis on the people. When Jesus spoke, life finally made sense. The scribes would quote the authorities to sustain their points; Jesus sustained his by the power of a living example. He still lives as the example for our lives today.

CONCLUSION

As we draw our study of the Sermon on the Mount to a close, my wish is that we all would examine each of our lives in comparison with this great sermon and determine to make those changes necessary to “***be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect.***” And with God’s help, we will find that life that is truly blessed by God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Jesus sum up his sermon?
2. What adjective is used to describe the first man?
3. Upon what did the first man build his house?
4. What does the “rock” represent?
5. How did Jesus describe the problems of life?
6. Name some problems that would crush most people?
7. How does Jesus describe the second man?
8. Upon what did he build his house and what did it represent?
9. How did the people react to Jesus message?
10. What was the difference between Jesus’ teachings and that of the scribes’?