



The
SERMON *on the* MOUNT



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How to use this guide

Review the context and big picture every week – The goal of a book study is not just to learn each individual lesson, but to build understanding of the Bible, how it fits together, and how to study it.

Try not to use this guide as a script. The purpose of this material isn't to give you exactly what to say. Rather it is to give you the content you need to structure and develop your own lessons. Teach as much as you feel is important for your class. Feel free to go off topic if your own study leads you to approach the passage in a slightly different direction.

Don't feel like you have to cover everything. There is a lot of material in each lesson. Some classes like to cover a lot of ground. Other classes like to camp on one point and drill deep. Start by teaching the Main Point, then teach the Main Bullet Points. Use the extra detail and discussion questions as you see fit. The goal is to generate discussion, specifically regarding life-application. So don't worry if you don't get all the way through a lesson.

Kingdom Blessedness

Matt. 5:1-12

Sometimes, our understanding of salvation is one-dimensional. We want to strip away all the unnecessary extra stuff that people bring to religion and give them the simple truth of what it means to be saved by Jesus. Admit you are a sinner. Believe that Jesus died on the cross for your sins. All true. But sometimes, it can leave a new believer with a sense of “Okay, now what? Where do I go from here?” We need to realize that salvation is more than just cancelling your debt. It’s more than just excusing you from the punishment; it’s about inviting you into a new way of living life. In Colossians 1:13, Paul says, “He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the Kingdom of His beloved Son.” Paying the penalty for our sin was the first step of our salvation. But Jesus didn’t free us from the prison of our sin just to leave us to wander through life on our own. He transferred us into His Kingdom.

Following Jesus means learning to live in His Kingdom. That is why Jesus, in Matthew 6:33, invites us to “seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness.” The best place to start to learn to seek the Kingdom of God is the Sermon on the Mount.

The Sermon on the Mount is found in the Gospel of Matthew in chapters 5 through 7. It is called that because Jesus delivered it while teaching his disciples up on a mountain. The reason He chose this site for this particular lesson was symbolic. He wanted to make sure His disciples knew that He was doing more than giving them a series of disconnected moral teachings. He intentionally chose this sight to appear like a new Moses. In Exodus, Moses came down from the mountain with the law of God which was designed to show the Hebrews how to live as the people of God. Jesus does something similar in the Sermon on the Mount. He is showing His followers what it is like to live as His followers. He is showing us what life in His Kingdom is like.

Kingdom Perspective v. 3

The Sermon on the Mount starts off with a series of statements that all begin with the phrase “Blessed are the...” This section is called the “Beatitudes” from the Latin word “beatus” which means “blessed.”

Jesus starts the sermon this way to show us that life in the kingdom means rethinking what it means to be blessed. Paul told the Romans in Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” If we are going to learn to live in the kingdom, we have to realize that God calls us to understand blessing in a new way. This list shows us who is blessed in God’s eyes, in Jesus’s eyes, and in the kingdom’s eyes.

We all carry around in our own heads a list of people we think are blessed. We might not use the term “blessing.” We might say “happy,” “fortunate,” “lucky,” “privileged,” something that reveals that we wish we were them. Who in our society do we call blessed, fortunate, or happy?

Think about the kinds of people our world celebrates. Now rephrase it in terms of “blessed are the [blank].” Blessed are the wealthy. Blessed are the powerful. Blessed are the successful, famous, healthy. These are all things the world tells us we should seek, that our lives would be incomplete without.

In 1 John 2:16, John gives us three categories to help us see clearly the kinds of things the world values: “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.”

- The Lust of the Flesh: Blessed are those who experience various kinds of pleasure.
- The Lust of the Eyes: Blessed are those who acquire various kinds of possessions.
- Boastful Pride of Life: Blessed are those who attain for themselves an elevated position over others.

What is your list of Beatitudes? What kind of people do you think are blessed? Learning to live in the Kingdom of Jesus begins when we start to shift our categories away from what the world gives us and start seeing things from a kingdom perspective.

Kingdom Pathways vv. 3-9

As we look closely at each beatitude, it is important for us to realize that this is more than just a random set of controversial attributes. The Beatitudes show us the path for entering the Kingdom of Jesus. And it starts in places you wouldn't imagine.

- **Poor in spirit** – The kingdom pathway starts with acknowledging your own poverty. Blessed are those who don't have it all together, who realize that they have needs, that they don't have it all figured out. Being poor in spirit means realizing that when we come to God, we bring nothing to the table. Too often, we think we are something when we aren't. We are like the church at Laodicea from Revelation 3:17, "You say, 'I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,' and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked." Entrance into the kingdom starts when admit own poverty before God.
- **Those who mourn** – The next step is to grieve over the brokenness in your life. It is possible to acknowledge your brokenness without it upsetting you. Many people shrug off their sin with a simple "nobody's perfect." Blessed are those who mourn means knowing your own spiritual poverty and having it break your heart. If you ever feel like you are in a place where you broke your life, don't worry that is where we all are. When you mourn over the life you see being ruined by sin, then you are finally in a place to be comforted by God. The comfort is that you didn't wreck God's plan. God is able to use any situation for His good: "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28)." Human evil doesn't trump God's plan: "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good (Gen. 50:20)." One day, God will overturn every place where evil temporarily claims a victory: "Behold, I am making all things new (Rev. 21:4)."
- **The meek** – We are next shown the personality trait that leads to success in the kingdom. The ones who will inherit the earth, meaning the ones who end up being successful in the end, are not those who shamelessly promote themselves or anxiously insert themselves into every situation, those who dominate, control, and think they are the center of things. Rather, the meek will turn out in the end to be the truly successful ones. Meekness does not mean weaknesses. It doesn't mean to be a doormat or a pushover. Meekness means to be gentle and humble. You don't have to tell weak people to be meek. You have to tell rough people to be gentle. Gentleness is power under control, and it is the secret to success in the kingdom.
- **Hunger/thirst for righteousness**: God came to give us life through Jesus. That life is through righteousness. He wants to make you righteous. God's law isn't some arbitrary set of rules that you have to follow or else God will get mad at you. They are an instruction manual about how to operate the human machine. Sin produces death. Righteousness brings life. God's judgement isn't some arbitrary and external condemnation of acts that He randomly happens to disapprove of. All the commands of God are Him saying "I know what I made you for. When you do that with your life, you will break it." The only life God can ever give you comes from being connected to Him. He can't give you life apart from Himself, for there is no such thing. The only thing that will satisfy you is the righteousness of God. Get close to Jesus and the life that comes from God will pour into your life. We are made for righteousness. The desires and longings you have are real; the things you think will satisfy it won't. The longing is misplaced. We were made for righteousness and our heart hungers for it. That is why those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled. Righteousness is the only thing that will ever satisfy you.

- The Merciful – Mercy means not receiving a bad thing that you do deserve. We all need it. We all have done things that we wish we could undo. No matter how hard we try or how much we want to, we can't undo them. When God forgives our sin, one of the things He does for us is to show us mercy. Part of living in the kingdom means showing that mercy to others. The way we do that starts with not rubbing people's nose in or beating people up with their bad past decisions.
- Pure in heart – This one is not about righteousness. We are called to be righteous. But that is not what Jesus is talking about there. "Pure in heart" means "single-minded in purpose at the core of our being." If you want to see God you have to want it most of all. Jeremiah 33:13 says, "You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart." Following Jesus isn't one of a long list of hobbies and attributes in our lives. It should be the defining characteristic of it. AW Tozer once said, "There are only two kinds of people in the world: those who seek God and those who seek to avoid God...and both will be successful in the end." If you seek God with single-minded devotion, with your whole heart, you will find Him.
- Peacemakers – The world is broken by sin, and sin divides. God came to reconcile and entrust us with the ministry of reconciliation. In 2 Corinthians 5:18 Paul writes, "Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation." We are called not to divide and to avoid the easy divisions that the world likes to chunk us into. If we want to be called children of God, we have to do what God does: bring people together, not divide them.

Kingdom Persecution vv.10-11

The life Jesus came to give us, the kingdom He came to invite us into, starts with a change in our perspective and encourages us to reimagine what it means to be truly blessed. It is important to realize that this new life is not going to make sense to the world. Some will be fascinated, others repulsed by it. Some may hate it so much that you will be attacked. That's the bad news. The good news is that when this happens, you can be glad. Persecution is a sign that you are living in the kingdom and are making a difference. You've found the battle line and are on the frontline where the Kingdom of God meets the Kingdom of this world. The even better news is that we know how the battle ends. As Revelation 11:15 says, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What does it mean that salvation is more than just forgiveness? What is the Kingdom of God? What does it mean to seek the kingdom?
2. How does our society define blessedness? How would it fill in the phrase "Blessed are the _____"? How would you?
3. How can we learn to change our perspective to align with kingdom priorities?
4. Which one of the Beatitudes is the hardest for you? Which do you find most encouraging?
5. What is persecution? What does it look like in our life? How are we supposed to respond?

Kingdom Influence

Matt. 5:13-16

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus teaching us what its like to live in His kingdom. After describing to us who the blessed ones really are when seen from the perspective of the kingdom, he describes the influence that kingdom members have, the role that kingdom citizens are supposed to play in the world at large.

We are used to rival kingdoms sharing a border. You enter one by leaving the other. But the kingdom of Jesus and the kingdom of this world don't work that way. The citizens of the kingdom of Jesus exists within the kingdom of this world. We have been strategically placed in order to transform this world from the inside out. We are to be in the world, but not of the world.

In this passage, Jesus shows us the influence we have as members of his kingdom. He shows us the role we play for the kingdom in the world. He shows us how we can influence our culture and in doing so, reveals what is wrong with the culture as well.

You are...

This passage starts with two words that are easy to overlook: You are. When Satan attacks us, one strategy he uses is to make us feel small, insignificant, like we don't have a part to play or are incapable of making a difference. Jesus starts this section by saying "YOU, the people I just mentioned, the poor in spirit, the gentle, those who mourn, peacemakers, you are the ones I have chosen to use to change the world."

Most of us think that real important stuff in life is happening someplace else. We spend most of our time trying to get there or feeling sorry for ourselves for not being involved. We need to realize that God has put us where He wants us. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:18, "God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired." We have a hard time appreciating our own effectiveness or the importance of the role we play. If you could only see things from heaven's perspective, you would realize that you play a pivotal and central role in God's massive plan. God doesn't need you, but He has chosen you and wants to use you in changing the world. And He has placed you right where you can do the most good.

Don't think you don't make a difference. Don't think you don't matter. We all have an opportunity to influence the world around us and see it transformed by our influence.

The Salt of the Earth...

Before the advent of electricity and refrigeration, one of the chief ways of preserving meat was to cover it in salt. Because of this, salt was an extremely valuable commodity. People were even paid in salt. The Latin word for salt ("sal") gave us the word salary. One of the reasons that the Romans wanted to hold on to the province of Judea so much was because of the salt in the Dead Sea region. They would divert the salt water in the Dead Sea into shallow pools, evaporate the water out, then gather and export the remaining salt. It was like printing money.

By calling his followers "the salt of the earth," Jesus is also showing us what is wrong with the world: it is in decay. Sin decays and corrupts the world. The kingdom of God is designed to prevent the decay that sin naturally causes. God's laws and commands are not arbitrary rules intended to spoil our fun. They are the instruction manual for living a healthy life. God hate sins because sin causes death. Sin breaks the good things God created. Evil is a twist in reality, a distortion of a thing originally created good. God sends us out to be a part of His great plan to undo this decay, to untwist this world and put it back into its originally intended form.

But what does salt do? Scientists and chefs tell us that salting something is basically turning the volume up on whatever you are salting. Salt makes something taste more like itself. Same with the Kingdom of God. The “rules” of Christianity don’t stifle us. As we become more like Christ, we will be most clearly who we were created to be.

Jesus follows up His calls for us to be salt with a warning. Unsalted salt is worthless. How does salt lose its saltiness? Most salt in the ancient world wasn’t all that pure. It had other things mixed in with it. Often, what you thought was salt could look white but had the salt drained out.

Jesus is saying the same about us. We can look like salt but not be salt. What happens if there is no salt in the salt. Sometimes in order to make the gospel acceptable to our culture, we end up selling the salt out of our message. Sometimes we are still attracted to the sinful, decaying parts of the world.

The purpose of the church has always been to challenge us to live in a different way than the world. The reason you come to church is not because of all the things that we have like good music, or coffee shops that make us look like the world. The reason you come is because your life is in decay. You come to escape that decay and find your true self at the foot of the cross.

You are the salt of the earth. You are designed to change the world. Too many times we let the world change us.

The Light of the World

Most of us have never been in real darkness. We have the opposite problem: light pollution. We have so much light that it keeps us from seeing other things. But, before electricity, when the sun went down, it got dark... fast. Imagine traveling at night and trying to find your way without the help of light. It would be very easy to get lost and not know which way you were headed. In such a world, a city full of people all lighting individual fires to heat and illuminate their homes, and to cook their food would be hard to miss. It would stand out and draw people to it. It would be a beacon of hope, safety, and security in a dark and dangerous world.

Jesus says that his kingdom is supposed to do the same thing. We are supposed to offer hope, direction to those who are in darkness. How do we do this? In Matthew 5:16, Jesus says, “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” Our lives are supposed to draw attention not to ourselves but to God. We are called to shine like the moon. The moon doesn’t generate its own light, it simply reflects the light of the sun. We are supposed to live in such a way that we point people to God.

Sometimes we misunderstand glory. We think it means credit. We think Jesus is saying that we should give God the credit for the things we do. It sort of means that but not really. Glory is a testimony that you give to another person to demonstrate to them what happens when you trust God with your life. The world is full of evil. We are all wondering who we can lean on, what will bring life and hope, what will bring encouragement and guidance. The question isn’t between faith or not. The question is what you will put your faith in: God, self, money. We all have faith in something. What we depend on to get us through, what we look to for security, that is what we have faith in. We all trust something. What is it? Does it work?

Being the light of the world means helping other people learn to trust God more. When we see others do it, we gain confidence to do it ourselves. You will find more encouragement to trust God when you watch what happens when other people trust God. You are called to be a light that draws people to God by living a life that testifies to the hope that is found by relying on Him and living in His kingdom.

Conclusion

Jesus came to fill up what is lacking in our lives, to fix what is broken, and to point us in the right direction. He calls us to be used by Him to fulfill this function. What kingdom are you living in? What is influencing you? What effect are you having on the world around you? Do you realize that the world is decaying because of

sin? Do you realize that the world is lost in darkness? Do you realize that you have been strategically placed in order to bring life and hope to a world that needs it?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What does it mean to have influence? Who influences you? Whom do you influence? Have you ever felt like you didn't matter or didn't have a part to play?
2. In Jesus's day, what was the main purpose of salt? What does it mean that we are the salt of the earth? What are some ways we can live out our role of preventing decay in the world?
3. What does it mean to look like salt but not be salt? How does that apply to us as followers of Jesus?
4. What does it mean that we are the light of the world? What does it mean to shine like the moon? What are some ways we can live out our role of offering people the guidance of God?
5. What does it mean to give glory to God? What is the purpose of doing it?

Kingdom Righteousness

Matt. 5:17-20

There is nothing more controversial in some circles of Christianity than the statement that those who follow God much seek righteousness. Many people think that the call to righteousness is just rule-keeping and works-based religion. They say things like, "Christianity isn't about rules; it's about a relationship." All of it is true. Some people treat Christianity like it is a list of rules you have to follow in order to be good enough for God to accept you. Such was often the approach of many Christians in recent memory. But our generation has found the ditch on the other side of the road. We believe that nobody is perfect, so we should quit trying to be. We believe we don't have to pretend. God knows who we really are and came to love us warts and all. Again, all of it is true. But incomplete.

God does know us completely and knows how deeply sinful we are. God does love us, but God's love isn't the passive love of a detached and benign grandfather blindly wanting us to do whatever we think will make us happy. We throw terms like legalism and Pharisee-ism at anyone who tries to remind us that seeking righteousness is essential to the Christian life. It's time we learned the word for believing that it doesn't matter how you live because God will love you no matter what. It is called "anti-nomianism." "Anti" means "against." "Nomos" means "law." Antinomianism means believing that law or righteousness don't matter.

We have to learn to find the middle path. We need to accept what is right about both positions and reject what is wrong. We need to be reminded that Christianity isn't about rules but about a relationship and that God does know and love us for who we are. We don't have to behave a certain way in order to be accepted by God. But we'd be foolish if we thought that being close to God wouldn't change us.

That is what today's passage is about. When Jesus began his ministry, He was breaking rules and associating with people He shouldn't. Many misunderstood what He was doing. They thought He was dismissing the law as old fashioned and denying the importance of righteousness. So, Jesus dedicates time in his famous sermon to address this issue. He tells his followers that He didn't come to abolish the law but to fulfill it, and that He didn't come to excuse them from some seeking righteousness but to require them to be more righteous than those they considered the most righteous. He is giving His followers the rules for living in His kingdom.

It might sound odd to use rules in a discussion of Jesus's kingdom, which is characterized by grace. But, these rules aren't rules for admission. You don't have to follow these rules before you are allowed to enter. Jesus already laid out the list of entrance requirements for His kingdom in the beatitudes. These rules are a prescription for how to find life.

Imagine you had a friend who was a genius doctor. He was incredibly knowledgeable about the causes of various illnesses, and he knew how to cure anything. Maybe when you met him you were really sick, and he restored you to health. And you, amazed by his talent, decided you wanted to stay as close as you could to him to benefit from his ability. It would be a sign of reckless stupidity and ignorance if you thought you could keep living dangerously and stupidly expect him to heal you every time. Wouldn't the best course of action be to try to stay healthy by listening to your friend and believing what he says about what constitutes healthy living? You may not be able to follow his instructions perfectly every time, and when you get sick again, he is there to restore. But to live in conscious neglect of the doctor's orders shows that you don't really value the doctor or want to be truly healed.

The same applies to Jesus and the righteousness He calls His followers to. We aren't trying to get well enough that we can go to the doctor's office. We are being restored by a doctor and now try to follow his prescriptions

in order to achieve the life He desires for us. The chief difference between the doctor and God is that God gives us the power to live His righteousness through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Practicing righteousness is not a prerequisite; it is a proof. It is a sign that God is working in someone's life.

Jesus Fulfills the Law vv. 17-19

Jesus went around seemingly disregarding the law. He healed on the Sabbath. He worked on the Sabbath. He ate and drank things He wasn't supposed to with people He wasn't supposed to be with. It would be natural for even His followers to think that He was going to tell them that He had come to cancel or abolish the law. So, it must have been a shock to them when He said in Matthew 5:27, "*Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.*"

It is important to notice two things that Jesus did NOT say. He didn't say He abolished the law. He also didn't say He endorsed the law. He claimed that His purpose was to fulfill the law. The law was given for a reason: to show us the things that lead to life, to teach us obedience, and to reveal our own sinfulness to us.

Jesus didn't come to add to or to set aside the law of God. He came to be the fulfillment of the reason that the law was given. In Galatians 3:24, Paul writes, "the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith." The law doesn't make us righteous. The law shows us we can't be righteous on our own. Jesus fulfilled the law by being righteous for us. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship*, "He has in fact nothing to add to the commandments of God except this, that He keeps them."

The reason Jesus emphasizes fulfillment is to underscore the fact the God doesn't change. God has one recipe for what brings life. God has one plan for redeeming and restoring fallen humanity. The plan didn't suddenly change when Jesus came.

Some might ask, though, what about the "rules" in the Old Testament that we no longer follow? Is Jesus saying that we should keep and teach them, too? It is important to distinguish between laws that are unchanging and laws which are for a specific people for a specific time. Many of the Old Testament "laws" that we no longer observe were focused on ceremonial and temple ritual. When Jesus came to be the fulfillment of the reason for temple sacrifice, he fulfilled those laws. They weren't abolished. The reason they were needed was superseded. But the reason they were given, the character of God, and the nature of what brings life—these don't change. Warren Wiersbe described it using the following analogy: "If I have an acorn, I can destroy it in one of two ways. I can put it on a rock and smash it to bits with a hammer. Or, I can plant it in the ground and let it fulfill itself by becoming an oak tree." Jesus did the latter. The law was the acorn. Jesus is the oak.

There are certain ceremonial customs that we no longer need to observe anymore. The early followers of Jesus began to realize this and began to realize things like dietary laws and religious festivals were no longer necessary. This point is summed up in Colossians 2:16-17, where Paul writes, "¹⁶ Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day— ¹⁷ things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ."

Jesus and Real Righteousness v. 20

Jesus concludes this section with a final scandalous statement: "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven."

Righteousness and law were intertwined in Jewish thinking. Being righteous meant keeping the law. And no one was better at understanding what it means to follow the law than the Scribes and Pharisees. So, Jesus telling his followers that they had to be more righteous than the Pharisees would have sounded at best hyperbolic and at worst impossible.

Jesus wasn't trying to discourage His followers. He was showing them that righteousness wasn't the problem. The problem was the way Pharisees sought it. They thought they knew how to get it. They thought you could do it on your own. In fact, they had come up with a checklist of several hundred rules to follow. Just check all the boxes, and God will be pleased with you. That is legalism.

Rejecting legalism doesn't mean rejecting righteousness. Jesus is telling His followers that they need righteousness and that it comes from a different source than they realized.

We live in an age where we sometimes focus exclusively on God's grace and forgiveness. But God's forgiveness and grace mean nothing without His righteousness. Without His righteousness, there is nothing to forgive. God cares about right behavior. He does so not out of a sense of Pharisaical rule keeping, but because righteousness produces life. The wages of sin is death. Sin produces death in our lives. God desires us to have life, so He desires us to be righteous.

Some people mistakenly believe that righteousness is not important for the Christian. We just have to receive the gift of Jesus. The truth is that righteousness IS the gift that Jesus came to give. The issue isn't whether righteousness is important. The issue is how you get it. In Romans 1:17-17, Paul says that righteousness comes not by trying to follow rules but by being close to the one who is righteous: ¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith."

Righteousness doesn't mean being right. It means being in right relationship. All the other words we use to describe it, such as virtue or ethics or morals, convey the idea that it is something we do for ourselves, by ourselves, and that we can be good on our own if we try hard enough. Righteousness doesn't work apart from relationship with God; that is why Paul said that he is "not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" and that the salvation the Gospel gives is simply the "righteousness of God." Righteousness doesn't mean trying to be good; it means learning to abide in Christ.

This is why Jesus told his followers, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." The Pharisees thought righteousness was achieved by one's own effort. Jesus is telling them that righteousness does bring life, but it comes through being connected with the One who is the source of life.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What does it mean that Jesus came to fulfill the law? How did He fulfill it? How is fulfilling the law different from abolishing or endorsing it?
2. How do we sometimes misunderstand what righteousness is?
3. Where did the Pharisees think righteousness came from? Why were they wrong?
4. What did Jesus mean that our righteousness should surpass the Pharisees?
5. How can we seek righteousness without becoming Pharisees ourselves?

Kingdom Righteousness in Action

Matt. 5:21-48

“Technically” is a terrible word. It doesn’t sound terrible, but it is. We add the word “technically” to something we did or said which we probably know was wrong but are trying to justify. As children we say things like: “well, that is technically not against the rules.” As adults, we learn to say, “I technically told you the truth” or “Technically, I wasn’t wrong.” We know “technically” is a terrible word because we all hate it when someone uses it on us. How would you like it if a business partner told you he had been “technically” fair with the company profits, or if a spouse told you they’d “technically” been faithful to you, or a child that they had “technically” been honest with you. We would all think, “so you were not “truly” honest, or faithful or fair.” Technically is the opposite of truly. Sadly “technically” is the kind of righteousness we are best at. We learn the rules, then look for ways to “technically” obey or at least appear to obey without having it change the way we want to live. Jesus came to show us the right way to be righteous. Jesus came to show us what real righteousness looks like. Real righteousness is not external rule keeping. That is the kind of righteousness that the Pharisees pursued. Jesus condemned this way of seeking in Matthew 23:27-8, when He said, “27 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. 28 So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

External acts can be a starting point for learning to live in righteousness but the goal is getting it in the core of our being. Real righteousness comes from abiding in Christ and letting His righteousness filter down into the core of who you are.

Last week we looked at the call of Jesus for us to pursue this kind of righteousness. This week we are going to look closely at some practical teaching as Jesus applies this approach to specific areas of our life. Each section will begin with, “You have heard that it was said” which contains a law that had been interpreted by the Pharisees in a very external way. Jesus then presents an alternative by saying, “But I say to you...” Each time Jesus encourages us to go beyond technical, superficial obedience to the law. The goal isn’t to appear right to others, but to be righteous in our souls. The goal of righteousness is not to achieve the bare minimum necessary to avoid punishment, but rather to become the fullest expression of whom you were created to be. If you haven’t committed murder, but your soul is still angry, you haven’t done your soul any good. That is what Jesus wants us to learn. The Righteousness of Jesus’s Kingdom will change your life, fulfill your life, but it has to filter into the core of who you are.

Righteousness and Anger (v21-26)

The first subject that Jesus tackles is murder. He says that being angry with your brother is on the same spectrum as murder. This might sound outlandish, but the truth is that murder comes from somewhere. People don’t just wake up one day and decide to do something contrary to their nature. In order to commit the act, we have to prepare our soul. In James 1:14-15, James talks about the way sin grows from temptation, to desire, to act, to death: “¹⁴ But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. ¹⁵ Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.”

Everyone thinks that their own anger is justified. We point to examples of God becoming angry and we use terms like “righteous anger or indignation” to make it sound like we are being the defenders of right. We should be deeply skeptical of our own ability to use something as dangerous and volatile as anger to accomplish good. In James 1:19-20, James writes, “Everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; ²⁰ for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.” Our anger doesn’t achieve the righteousness that we think it does.

Jesus says that the source of murder is anger. He describes anger as a form of contempt, where we look down our noses at people and we call people, “Good for nothing” and “fool.” Our responses should be to pursue reconciliation with all people who might be in conflict with us. He says that such reconciliation is even more important than worship. Jesus tells his followers to leave their offering on the altar and go be reconciled with their brother (v24).

Notice that Jesus doesn’t say who is right or wrong. He just says be reconciled. The highest goal isn’t vindication, or even restitution, but reconciliation. That is what God does for us when He forgives us. He calls us to do the same.

Righteousness and Desire (v27-32)

The next subject Jesus deals with is equally controversial and difficult. He discusses lust, adultery and divorce. Like with murder, so many times we externalize our approach to these difficult subjects and simply try learn how to avoid performing the offending actions. But Jesus says that you can commit these actions in your heart. The goal is to transform your heart to such an extent that you no longer wish to perform the action.

The mistake that Jesus is trying to correct is a fundamental distortion of how we view other people in the context of sex. Both lust and divorce fail to treat the other person as created in the image of God. Sin teaches us to see sex as something we GET from someone else. When we do that, we stop seeing people as created in the image of God. That is why lust is such a danger. It changes our outlook. It distorts how we see others. It trains us to see others as something we can use for our own pleasure.

Jesus’s teaching on divorce follow along these lines as well. In Jesus’s day, men could divorce a women for any reason as long as they gave her a certificate of divorce proving she was released from the marriage. Men could do this for any reason. In every society, our own included, divorce more negatively impacts a woman’s financial and economic situation than a man’s. Jesus is telling the men of his day that they aren’t allowed to throw a person a way when they are done when them. Marriage and sex are about devotion and commitment.

Finding fulfillment in a relationship is a choice and requires commitment. That is why Proverbs 5:18-19 says, “Rejoice in the wife of your youth. ... Be exhilarated always with her love.” A spouse isn’t something to cat aside when you no longer find pleasure in them. If you no longer find pleasure in a spouse, it is your problem, not theirs. This proverb tells us to choose to love them and see them the way God does, rather than use them for your own selfish desires. When we do so, they joy and exhilaration will follow.

Righteousness and Honesty (v33-37)

Jesus next turns to the subject of oaths. The problem in question revolves around people in Jesus’ day using oaths as a way of deceiving people. They would say things like, “I swear by the gold on the temple,” then when they wanted to be excused from their obligation, they would say that it was ok to break their oath because they didn’t swear by the temple itself.

The core issue is whether our words carry any weight. When we say one thing, then do another, then excuse ourself my saying we “technically” weren’t obligated to follow through, then we have damaged our character. This problem might not manifest itself in the same way in our world, but we know it well. We all have friends, family, or acquaintances who always tell us they will do things, maybe even have good intentions in doing them, but something always happens that prevents them from following through. There is always an excuse, a justification, a complication, a reason.

Jesus says that we should be the kind of people whose word is relied upon. We don’t use words to mislead people or misrepresent things. Our yes means yes. Our no means no. People can trust that what we say, we will do.

Righteousness and Conflict v38-48

The final area Jesus focuses on is conflict resolution. Have you ever seen siblings fight? One person did

something to the other. So the other person retaliates. You ask why either of them did what they did, and they will say they are only responding to what the other person did first. When we see it in 8 year olds, the futile nature of the perpetual cycle is obvious. But this problem is repeated over and over in human history. When we are hit, we like to hit back. We want to get even. But this doesn't solve the problem, it just feeds the flame of evil. Jesus shows his followers a new way. He shows them how to take the evil out of circulation.

The first thing Jesus says, and which countless parents have said to their children, is "you don't have to respond." Often we are so eager to enforce what we believe are our rights, that we walk around all the time like a spring ready to be sprung or a gun ready to go off. Any perceived insult or injury and we explode. In 1 Corinthians 6:7, Paul asked the Corinthians who were busy suing one another a hard question, "Why not rather be wronged?" Are you worried that God doesn't see, or that God won't provide for and protect you? Jesus in this passage shows his followers how to move from perpetual retaliation to love and service. It starts first with a passive act of not responding to being hit. The kind of hit that is referenced is the physical equivalent of being insulted. Maybe we aren't prone to hit back, but are quick to respond when insulted. Jesus says the first step is not to respond.

Jesus then tells his followers to "go the extra mile." This is where that phrase comes from. Roman soldiers could compel locals to carry their equipment for a mile. Jesus says not to do the bare minimum, even when compelled by people you don't like. Go beyond. Serve them.

This attitude of non-retaliation and service is only possible if you see them the way God sees them. That is why Jesus continues this passage with a call to learn to love even those who are your enemies and pray for those who are consciously cruel to you. God loves every person, no matter how much they are twisted by sin. He desires to see them restored fully to right relationship with Him and with others. We can be a part of that by trying to live in right relationship with others, no matter how they treat us, and to do so not because of what they have done but because of who they are in God's eyes.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How do we use words like "technically" to excuse or cover-up our sin? How does that lead to us pursuing "external righteousness? What does it mean to be a "white-washed tomb?" How does the righteousness of Jesus differ from this?
2. How do we sometimes justify our anger? How can we learn to be "slow to anger" like James teaches? How can we learn to pursue reconciliation first?
3. How is human sexuality broken by sin? How do lust and adultery reveal an inability to see the image of God in others? What can we do to change this?
4. Do you know somebody whose word can't be trusted? Does your yes mean yes and your no mean no? If not, how do we start making our words matter again?
5. How have you seen the circle of retaliation manifest itself in children and adults? Have you ever been tempted to hit because you've been hit back. Have you ever done mediocre work because you were being compelled by a bad person? How does love help us break this cycle?

Kingdom Disciplines: Giving and Fasting

Matt 6:1-4, 16-18

There was a Christian fad a couple decades ago that involved a wristband with the initials WWJD printed on it. It stood for “What Would Jesus Do?” The point of the wristband was to remind you to try and act like Jesus acted.

The problem is that knowing what to do and being able to do it are two different things. Coaches don’t tell basketball players just to ask themselves WWMJD (what would Michael Jordan Do?), or WWLJD (What Would LeBron James Do?). Coaches tell basketball players to practice, to train, to prepare themselves so that when the moment comes, you are able to respond the way you wish.

In the same way that athletes need practice, so do we. We need training so that we can build in ourselves the spiritual muscle memory we need to respond the way we should in the circumstances we find ourselves in. The term for this kind of spiritual “practice” is discipleship. The root at the center of this word means “student.” It means seeing yourself as the student of Jesus and learning from Him. In Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus offers this invitation: ²⁸ “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

Jesus invites us to learn from Him. He offers to show us how to live life. When we do so, He promises us we will find rest for our souls.

The section of the Sermon on the Mount we turn to now contains some teaching of Jesus regarding actions Jesus expects His followers to be engaged in regularly. Matthew 6:1 refers to “practicing righteousness.” Though they don’t carry any sports connotations, the actions Jesus mentions are kind of like “righteousness practice.” They are repeated activities that we do in order to train ourselves to become the people whom God wants us to be. And just like practice, the more we practice them, the better we will be able to do them.

The traditional term used by Christians for this “righteousness practice” is Spiritual Disciplines. Like Discipleship, the root of Discipline is “student”. Spiritual Disciplines are the actions of disciples that help them practice living out the righteousness their teacher, Jesus, wants them to have.

The three Spiritual Disciplines Jesus discusses in this chapter are Giving, Praying, and Fasting. We will spend the next lesson focusing exclusively on Prayer. Today we are going to look at what Jesus says about two things we might feel uncomfortable with: Giving and Fasting. We will look at what Jesus calls us to do, how we can obey, and what we are supposed to learn from it.

Kingdom Motivation (v. 1)

Before we look closely at the disciplines themselves, we need to consider the warning that Jesus starts with: “Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them.” At first glance, this might seem a little contradictory to something Jesus just said. In Matthew 5:16, Jesus says, “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” So, which is it? Are we supposed to do everything in secret, or are we supposed to do everything publicly so everyone can see? How can we fulfill Matthew 5:16, without people knowing what we are doing?

The warning of Jesus here is not about the actions themselves, but about our motivation for doing them. It’s true, our conduct must be visible in order for God to be glorified by others. But we shouldn’t do them to gain attention for ourselves. We are to be focused on pleasing God, not pleasing others or self.

In that context, “let your light shine” is a command that counters our temptation to hide when we are afraid of what people will think or how they might respond. ““Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them” is a command that counters our desire to exalt ourselves and be visible. Nineteenth century Scottish Pastor A.B. Bruce said it best: “We are commanded to show when tempted to hide and hide when tempted to show.”

Kingdom Giving (vv. 2-4)

Anytime there is talk of money, people get uncomfortable. When we have plenty of it, we feel like we are entitled to it, we always want more, and we aren't easily parted from it. One of the reasons God calls us to give is to break us of our love of money.

Giving reminds us that everything we have comes from God. 1 Corinthians 4:7, Paul says, “7For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?” What we have is gift from God. Giving is a chance to show God and ourselves that we are depending on Him and not His blessings.

Giving reminds us that God wants us to us to show mercy. In this passage, Jesus says more than just give. He says give to the poor. Maybe your Bible says give alms. The Bible talks about giving to God via tithes and offerings. Here, Jesus says we should give to other people as well. We kick against this kind of giving very much. Often when we give to someone in need, we do so like we are helping them out of a one-time ditch, but this is the only time, and we expect them to do better and manage on their own next time. We look condescendingly at people who are in perpetual need of assistance. To these people we are more prone to offer advice or criticism, rather than help. But it is precisely these kinds of people that Jesus is referring to. The phrase in Greek can literally be translated as “when you do acts of mercy...” Mercy means not giving people something bad that they do deserve. It means not beating people over the head with the effects of their bad decisions. It means helping them during a crisis that they may have been the cause of. Showing mercy to others is hard. That is why Paul, in Romans 12:8, calls mercy a spiritual gift. Not that only certain people need to do it, but certain people are better at it than others and they need to show us the way and lead by example. Giving gives us the opportunity to be used by God to bless others. The truth is that God gives more than enough to some people so that they might have the joy of being used by God as conduit of His blessing to others. God also gives not enough to others so that they have the joy of cheerfully depending on God and seeing Him miraculously provide. We aren't the first people to struggle with this kind of giving. Evidently, the Corinthians were having a hard time giving to people who always seem to need money. To them, Paul says,¹³ “It is not that there should be relief for others and hardship for you, but it is a question of equality.”¹⁴ At the present time your surplus is available for their need, so that their abundance may in turn meet your need, in order that there may be equality.¹⁵ As it is written: The person who had much did not have too much, and the person who had little did not have too little (2 Corinthians 8:13-15).”

Kingdom Fasting (vv. 16-18)

Fasting is a Spiritual Discipline that is often misunderstood. In the Old Testament, people often fast as a sign of devotion to God and penitence for their sin. Because of that, a great deal of personal showmanship had emerged in Jesus's day where people tried to show each other how pious, or disciplines, or penitent they were.

Jesus doesn't ban fasting. He bans the showy ostentation that tried to get the attention of other people. In fact, Jesus expects his followers to fast. He says, “when you fast...”

Though people often fasted as an act of penitence, the truth is that the reason for fasting is not about sorrow. Jesus came to free us from the bonds of sin. He came to give us joy. If that is the case, why did he still expect his followers to fast? It is because fasting is not about showing sorrow but about confessing our dependence on God.

Fasting humbles us. Psalm 35:15 says, "I humbled my soul with fasting." We live in a world that constantly tells us to assert our dominance, grow our influence, and boast our ego. Everything is a competition and we are encouraged to make sure we have what it takes to come out on top. One of the easiest ways to remind yourself of how weak and small we really are is to skip a meal or two. We sometimes call it getting "hangry." But the truth is, in those moments we realize how little it takes to knock us off our pedestal. This is a reason why many followers of Jesus do fast: as a way of obeying what James 4:10 says, "Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord."

Fasting also redirects our priorities. In Philippians 3:17-19, Paul wrote about people He called "enemies of the cross of Christ." One way he describes them is: "their god is their belly." By abstaining from food, we realize just how much we have lived our lives focused on the fulfill our physical needs. In Matthew 4:4, during the Temptations of Jesus, while He was fasting, Jesus said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'" Fasting teaches us to realize that our physical needs are not as important as our spiritual needs. We realize that it is not just food that gives life.

Fasting also confesses our dependency on God. This was more pronounced in Jesus days, where bread had to be baked daily, and food was hard to find and difficult to preserve. Forgoing food for a period of time was dangerous, because you might not know when or where your next meal might come from. Fasting was a way of demonstrating your complete dependency on God in a tangible, risky way, trusting Paul's words in Philippians 4:19: "And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is a Spiritual Discipline? What is the purpose of engaging in them? What does it mean to "practice righteousness?"
2. How can we learn to "let our light shine", and at the same time, "beware of practicing our righteousness before men"?
3. We might not blow a trumpet, but what are some ways that we do "practice our righteousness before men to be noticed by them"?
4. Why does giving make us uncomfortable? How can giving be an act of mercy? What are reasons we use to justify not giving?
5. Why does fasting make us uncomfortable? What are bad reasons to fast? What is the purpose of fasting? Have you ever fasted? What was the result?

Kingdom Communication: Pray Then in This Way

Matt 6:6-14

Sometimes, we use ignorance as an excuse for not beginning. We don't know how to do something, so we are afraid or unwilling to do it. Everything from employment to exercise tends to operate according to Newton's Law that things at rest will stay at rest unless operated on by an outside force. The word for this is "inertia." The word literally means "not moving." The first step to doing anything is to overcome the natural immovability that we all seem prone to. So, we come up with motivational slogans like "Just Do it." Starting to do something is one of the hardest parts.

Once we have overcome the initial inertia and have started our lives going in a specific direction, the natural next questions are "Am I doing this right?" and "Am I headed in the right direction?" Few choices or actions that we make are perfect from the beginning. Most require some midcourse corrections as we come to fully appreciate where we are headed and what is required of us.

Prayer is one of those things. We know we are supposed to. Maybe we even feel an urge to. But we often fail to do it for a wide range of reasons and excuses. What do I say? How do I know God hears me? How do I hear God? The first answer to many of these questions is simply, "just do it" and see what happens. If prayer really is communication with a personal, living God who desires to be in relationship with you, then do it and see what happens.

But eventually we start asking, "Am I doing this right?" We ask like Jesus's disciples ask in Luke 11:1, "Teach us to pray." The teaching that Jesus gives in the Sermon on the Mount serves as good guard rails for our prayer life.

The Wrong Way to Pray

The first instructions Jesus gives about praying is what not to do. He gives two incorrect ways of praying, one from the Jewish world, one from the Pagan.

Don't pray to get man's attention (vv. 5-6)— One distortion of prayer is to use it to demonstrate how pious and religious you are. Evidently, some people in Jesus's day would seize every opportunity to pray publicly in the synagogue and on the street corners. The problem isn't they are praying publicly, but they are doing it to be seen by men. They are showing off, performing. Their focus isn't on God but on who sees them praying. Jesus tells a parable about such people in Luke 18:9-14: ⁹ And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: ¹⁰ "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' ¹³ But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Jesus commands us not to use prayer to exalt ourselves in the eyes of others. If you pray hoping other people will hear and be impressed by your words, you are a hypocrite, literally an actor, a performer.

Don't pray to get God's attention (vv. 7-8) – Jesus next addresses a pagan problem with prayer. Many pagan religions taught that the first thing worshippers had to do was to get the gods' attention. The bigger the sacrifice, the more likely a god would notice. The more words you use, the greater chance that one of the gods will hear you.

In response, Jesus says that you don't have to get God's attention, or spell out your need, or convince Him to act on your behalf because "your Father knows what you need before you ask Him." Imagine the profound sense of comfort that comes from knowing that God isn't some distant and disconnected lord whose attention you must work to gain. Rather, He is already focused on you and knows you so deeply that He sees your needs.

Psalms 139 describes this beautifully. The Psalm begins:

¹ O Lord, You have searched me and known me.

² You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You understand my thought from afar.

³ You scrutinize my path and my lying down, And are intimately acquainted with all my ways.

⁴ Even before there is a word on my tongue, Behold, O Lord, You know it all.

⁵ You have enclosed me behind and before, And laid Your hand upon me.

⁶ *Such* knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is *too* high, I cannot attain to it."

You don't have to get God's attention before you pray. He is already intimately acquainted with you. His eye is continually upon you in love. Medieval Christmas had a phrase for this: "coram deo". It means, "before the face of God". All of us live our lives with God's face upon us. He sees us and knows us. We need but turn to Him and He is ready to hear us.

The Right Way to Pray

Jesus next teaches his disciples how to pray. It is called by many "The Lord's Prayer" because our Lord gave it to us. Some choose instead to call it the "the disciple's prayer" or "the model prayer" because Jesus gave it to his disciples as a model for how they themselves are supposed to pray.

Pray to the One True God

The first direction Jesus gives is to realize whom you are praying to.

- "Father" – Many pagans believed that the gods took no notice of humans, or saw them the way we see animals, useful for our purposes but not similar in nature. Jesus reminds us that the God we are praying to is Father. That one word carries with it the full force of Biblical Revelation about who God is and how He relates to us. We are created in His image. He desires to be in relationship with us. Yes, He is the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth. But as our Father, that means that He is approachable by us. He desires us to come. He invites us to come. Through Jesus, He has made a way for us to come to Him.
- "Our" – It might seem like over-scrutinizing the text, but the truth is there is tremendous truth contained in the plural "our". A common mistake is that our relationship to God is something we do on an individual basis. Yes, we all must come to God for ourselves, but we are not invited to remain by ourselves. He invites us to be involved in His family. He desires to restore our broken relationships with each other as well as with Him.
- "Who is in heaven" – Reminding ourselves that God is in heaven corrects a couple errors. First, it reminds us to reject a pantheistic view of nature that sees the entire created order as God himself. God isn't the universe. He is separate from it. He is in heaven. This separation between God and his world also reminds us of his holiness. One day heaven and earth will be rejoined, but right now they are separated because of sin. Praying to Our Father reminds us God is close to us and cares. Praying to our Father in Heaven reminds us also that God is set apart and holy. That is why God sent Jesus, to open the way so that we can enter into the presence of God confidently.

Pray for His Glory: On Earth as It Is in Heaven

Praying to God in heaven reminds us that heaven and earth are currently separated because of sin. The first thing we are supposed to pray for is that this separation would be undone. God is at work to undo the effects of sin. We are encouraged to center our prayers on seeing this happen more and more in our own world. Jesus lists three specific areas where we are to focus our requests.

- Focus on God's Name: Worship

"Hallowed be Your name" – This means, "let your name be treated differently from all other names." In the Bible, mentioning someone's name is way of referring to their nature, character, and personality. Praying for God's name to be hallowed is to pray that that we would see God for who He really is and give Him the unique place which His nature and character demand. It is a prayer that people would discover who God really is and be moved to worship Him because of it.

- Focus on God's Kingdom: Submit

"Your kingdom come" – Our world is currently in rebellion from its creator and true lord. God loves what He made and is at work to reclaim it for his own. We are encouraged to pray that God's kingdom would come more and more in our midst, that more people would see Him for who He is and be drawn back to Him. In order to enter God's kingdom, though, we have to be willing to leave our own. Praying for God's kingdom to come is an invitation to renounce our desire to build our own little kingdom and to submit to Him instead.

- Focus on God's Will: Obey

"Your will be done" – God is all powerful. That means His will is always done. Praying that God's will be done is more about aligning our will with God's. You can say "your will be done" in bitter resentment, or defeated resignation. Or you can eagerly desire what God has for you. That is what praying for God's will means. It means wanting what God wants more than what you want. It is an invitation to obedience.

Pray for Your Good

Sometimes, we think that focusing on God means that our own needs get left out. We mistakenly think that God's glory and our good are somehow in competition. But it is not a zero-sum game. God doesn't boost his glory at the expense of our good. God's glory is that His plan works out for our good as well. In fact, we are free to focus on God and His will simply because we have been reassured that "He knows what we need before we ask Him."

The last part of the Lord's prayer is an invitation to submit our petitions to God. The three areas that they center on are perhaps good indicators of the way in which we should understand our own needs in light of who God is.

- Ask for Provision: Dependence

"Daily bread" – We are encouraged to submit our requests to God. We are invited to look to Him to meet our needs. God knows. God cares. We are encouraged to ask, though, for our daily bread. We often pursue an illusion of complete self-sufficiency. We try to do it ourselves and wish to rely on no one else. We see such reliance as weakness. The truth is that self-reliance is an illusion. Everything we have is a gift from God. Trying to rely only on ourselves is just another way of saying we are trying set ourselves up as the lords of our own kingdoms. Daily bread is also personal. If He gave us yearly or decade-ly bread, we would be tempted to forget God until we needed His help again. Like parents renewing their relationship with their children over a meal, God draws us into relationship by inviting us to look to Him to provide for our needs.

- Ask for Forgiveness: Restoration

"Forgive us our sins" – Our biggest need, though, is our sin. It corrupts our desires and ruins our relationships. We are encouraged to ask God to forgive us. God is rich in lovingkindness and loves showing mercy. He is ready to do it. He waits for us to ask, so that we can acknowledge our need and seek restoration. Included in this request is a request for restored relationships. We ask God to forgive us, and we ask for help as we forgive other people. God wants us to show to others the same mercy and love that God shows us.

- Ask for Deliverance: Guidance

“Lead us not into temptation” – The last thing we are told to ask for is assistance in escaping temptation. This request is actually a two-fold acknowledgment. First, we admit that we are involved in a battle against evil forces. Though your Bible may say “deliver us from evil,” the truth is that the Greek is more literally translated, “deliver us from the evil one.” We don’t like talking about spiritual forces. We think of cartoonish images and Halloween costumes when people talk about Satan and demons. But just as Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness in Matthew 4, we are constantly tempted as well. Many people fall into sin because they don’t even realize that they are under attack. Second, this passage reminds us that not only is it a spiritual battle, but we are bad at fighting it. We need help because we give in too easily to sin. The good news is that because Jesus endured temptation without failing, He is able to come to our aid. Hebrews 4:15-16 says, “15 For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. 16 Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” He will give us mercy for our failings and grace to help lead us out of temptation. But we have to want it, and the truth is we are often quite willing to be ensnared by sin.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Do you ever have problems praying? Why? What does praying to get people’s attention look like in today’s world? How can we resist that temptation and focus on God alone?
2. How do we sometimes pray like the pagans Jesus mentions? Do you sometimes feel like you need to get God’s attention, like God doesn’t care, or notice? How can we fight this fear and trust that God knows our needs?
3. How do the words/phrases “Our”, “Father” and “in heaven” each help to deepen our understanding of the nature of the God we are praying to?
4. What does it mean to pray for God’s “name to be hallowed”, “His kingdom come” or “His will be done”? What does it mean to pray focusing on God’s glory? What does it mean to pray asking for our good?
5. Why does God offer us only daily bread? Why do you think we are reminded to forgive even as we ask forgiveness? Why do we not like talking about spiritual warfare? How do we sometimes put ourselves in a place to be ensnared by temptation?

Focus: Where Your Heart Is

Matt. 6:19-24

There is an old kid's song they used to sing that went like this: "Be careful little eyes what you see, be careful little eyes what you see. For the father up above is looking down in love, so be careful little eyes what you see." The song repeats through a few more verses, changing to "be careful little ears what you hear"; then "be careful little tongue what you say" and "be careful little hands what you do" before ending with "be careful little feet where you go" and "be careful little heart whom you trust."

When I first thought deeply about the song I was tempted to see it as a form of pharisaical legalism. Better watch your step because God has his eye you and is ready to smite you if you mess up or step out of line. I even went so far as to be indignant at the song for suggesting that I was responsible for the things I was exposed to. Surely, I wasn't to blame for all the negative images that the world constantly bombarded me with.

But as I thought even more deeply, I realized the profound wisdom of the song. God isn't looking down in judgement, but in love. He desires us to make sure we are living our lives careful of the consequences of our actions.

Though it is true we sometimes are exposed to things without our choice or consent, on the whole, we have a tremendous amount of choice about the things we are exposed to. What we are exposed to changes our perspective and modifies our desires and ultimately shifts the direction of our lives. That is something this song gets exactly right. Be careful what you see and hear, because it will shape what you do, where you go, and whom you trust.

As we continue our study of the Sermon on the Mount, we encounter three cautions that Jesus gives to his followers as the precursor to avoiding anxiety. In Matthew 6:25, Jesus says, "For this reason I say to you, do not be worried..." The phrase "For this reason" points to the fact that what He just said has been building up to this. Jesus is showing us the source of anxiety. It begins in what we focus on. What we focus on ends up consuming us. So, we need to be careful. We need to guard the access to our hearts, because what we allow in determines the kind of people we are in the process of becoming.

Be Careful What You Value (vv. 19-21)

Jesus first tells us to worry about what we treasure. This passage concludes with the reason. Verse 21 says, "for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." In the Bible, heart means more than emotions. It refers to your will, the very center of your being, the thing that gives orientation and direction to everything you do. Jesus tells us to be careful what you treasure because it will determine what is in our hearts which determine the direction of our lives.

Jesus doesn't make categories of treasure like money, or education, or property then tell us whether they are good or bad. Rather, He divides everything into two groups: earthly treasure and heavenly treasure. These categories have been wrongly assumed to be about physical and spiritual things, as if Jesus is saying physical things like houses, money, and clothes are bad, and spiritual things like prayer and worship are good. God created everything in this world. When He did so, He looked at everything and declared it good. Jesus isn't talking about the things, but our focus upon them. Others make the extreme interpretation that this command is about how saving money is wrong because it shows we aren't trusting God. That is not what this means either.

Storing up treasures on earth means doing whatever it takes to get whatever you can of the physical blessings God has filled the earth with. The problem is not in the thing, but in our priorities. If you seek fulfillment in pleasure or possessions, you will eventually start making choices that lead you away from God's purposes.

When you don't have whatever it takes to get the earthly joys that you desire, you will realize two things. First, you will have alienated yourself from a God who loves you and from the rest of humanity. Second, you will soon realize that the things you value aren't actually secure because they don't last. They can be broken or consumed or taken away from you. You will end up alone with nothing.

Storing treasure in heaven means investing your life in what God is doing: Seeking His kingdom, learning to live in obedience to His commands, trusting that the God who made you knows what will ultimately bring you joy. Laying treasure in heaven is to treasure all of the aspects of heavenly life, including all of what God is doing on the earth. It is ironic: focus on the earth, end up with nothing. Focus on heaven, get earth thrown in as part of the bargain. That is precisely the promise Jesus will make in a few verses: "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you (Matthew 6:33)."

Be Careful What You See (vv. 22-23)

The next words of Jesus in the passage are very enigmatic. Jesus talks about lamps, eyes, bodies, and darkness. Most people just skip over them because they have a hard time figuring out what they mean, or how they relate to what comes before and after. The truth is that this passage is about how our focus determines what we value. When we continually set our eyes on something, we fill our minds with it. In Matthew 12:35, Jesus says, "For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart." If our words reveal what is in our heart, how did what is in our hearts get there? This passage shows us that every time we focus our attention on something, we are filling our souls a little bit with it.

What we focus on ends up consuming us. If you focus on what frustrates you, you will become more angry. If you focus on what you fear, you will become more afraid. If you focus on something you think will bring you fulfillment, you will convince yourself that you can't live without it. The world bombards us with images of things that it promises will bring us fulfillment. In 1 John 2:16, John divides them into 3 categories: "lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life." "The lust of the flesh" means seeking fulfillment in pleasure. "Lust of the eyes" means seeking fulfillment in possessions. "Boastful pride of life" means seeking fulfillment in position.

The biblical solution is to shift your focus. Colossians 3:2 says, "Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth." It is the same distinction as above: heavenly vs earthly treasure. When we focus on earthly treasure, we fill ourselves up with destructive desire. When we find ourselves consumed with destructive desire, the solution isn't to try to expel the bad desire from us, but rather to fill ourselves up with correct desire, to shift our focus and flood the darkness of our soul with the light of life.

Be Careful What You Serve (v. 24)

This last verse serves almost as a conclusion of this section. It underscores everything in this study by reframing it one last time. We all serve something or someone. You may think you don't serve anybody except yourself, but you are wrong. We are all needy and we look to something to fill up what is lacking in ourselves. Here, Jesus calls God's chief rival as "mammon," which is probably best translated as "stuff." Mammon is the earthly treasures Jesus was telling His followers not to hoard. The point here isn't what mammon is. The point is where our loyalty lies. You can only serve one master. Jesus says that the man who pretends to have two masters "will hate the one and love the other; or he will be devoted to one and despise the other." There is one voice that we listen to more than any others, one voice that has the power to command our obedience no matter what. That is who or what we serve.

We need to stop pretending that we can avoid making a choice. The whole story of God's relationship with man is an invitation to choose whom we will serve.

After leading the Israelites into the Promise Land, Joshua assembles the people and issues this invitation to choose in Joshua 24:14-15, "14 "Now, therefore, fear the Lord and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. 15 If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Jesus issues a similar challenge to His followers in Matthew 16:24-26, "24 Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. 25 For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"

It seems paradoxical. Try to save your life by seeking all the things you think will benefit it and you will lose it in the end. Choose to deny yourself and serve God instead and you will discover the life that will give you the security and peace you were always seeking. The Christian missionary and martyr Jim Elliot famously said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are treasures on earth and in heaven? What does it mean to try to store them up?
2. How can we best determine where our treasures lie? What are some things we try to treasure?
3. What does "the lamp of the body is the eye" mean? How does what we focus on determine what we value?
4. How can changing our focus change us for the better? What does it mean to "set our minds on things above"?
5. How do we sometimes try to serve two masters? Why is it impossible to serve two masters? How can we determine who we really do serve?

Kingdom Trust: Seek First the Kingdom

Matt. 6:25-34

In 1943, an American psychologist, named Abraham Maslow, published his idea that the reasons people have for acting the way they do can be understood as a drive to satisfy a series of basic needs every human feels. These needs are prioritized starting with the most basic physical needs like air, food and water. Once a person has their most basic physical needs met, they can move on to more complex needs like social or psychological fulfillment.



This theory, called Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, gives us a window into what drives people and can help us understand how we all act the way we do. It is a theory about how humans prioritize things. The search for food is more important than the search for a prestigious job. Once we have a way of getting food, we search for shelter, then eventually not just a job but a job that gives us a sense of fulfillment.

This raises an important question though. Where do things like "religion" and "church" and "God" fit? Most psychologists would lump religion into the "luxury" category and say it is a low priority. And many of us agree. Look at the way we prioritize things. A student doesn't do well in school. A parent says, "That's it, you can't go to youth group until you get your homework done." In the parent's mind, school is more important and has a higher priority than church. Perhaps you are inclined to agree. But replace church with something else and see what happens. Would you think well of a parent who said, "That's it, you can't go to the doctor's office until you get your homework done." No. Because we understand that education is a good thing. But it's not more important than the health of the individual. But isn't the church, in some way, a doctor's office of the soul? Isn't the parent putting the student's spiritual health in danger by keeping them from going to church?

The purpose of this example isn't to critique how parents encourage good study habits in their children but to draw attention to how we, sometimes without knowing it, de-prioritize the things of God. Parents do this with their students. But adults also do this with themselves by emphasizing their career, their hobbies, or their stuff over God. Seeking God becomes something that individual people do with their spare time as long as they don't have anything better to do.

The good news is that we are not the first people to be focused on satisfying our basic needs and leaving God until last. This is the universal human condition. The problem is that our perpetual focus on satisfying our needs is a never-ending, fruitless struggle that will leave us exhausted and unfulfilled. That is why Jesus moves from His discussion of whom we serve and what we treasure, to a discussion of anxiety. Verse 25 starts with the phrase “for this reason.” Everything Jesus says in the following passage about freeing ourselves from worry is rooted in what He has just said about having the right treasure, focus, and master.

In this passage, Jesus calls us to reevaluate our priorities and reorient our lives around seeking what is most important. We choose to follow other masters or serve our own desires, because we are consumed by worry and fear nobody is looking out for us. Jesus shows us in this passage how freedom from worry increases as we learn to trust God more.

Trust God’s Perspective (v. 25)

The first way we are invited to trust God is how He invites us to shift our perspective. Jesus tells His followers, “Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?” Sometimes we get so caught up in preserving our lives that we forget what life is for. You don’t live so you can have a job. You have a job so you can live. You don’t live so that you can eat. You eat so that you can live. Most of us never think about the point of life because we are so caught up seeking after our basic necessities or focusing on acquiring the things the world tells us to value. Jesus invites us to ask the staggering question, “If you knew your basic needs were taken care of, what would be worthwhile for you to spend your life doing?” Most of us don’t have an answer to that question, because we never knew we could ask it. That is why when most people do get more money than they need, they begin to become self-indulgent. Their whole life has been focused on fulfilling their needs, so they proceed to find more needs than they need to fulfill. Jesus invites us to shift our focus, to trust God’s perspective, and to believe that there is more to life than just trying to stay alive.

Trust God’s Provision (vv. 26-30a)

The reason we can be free to shift our perspective is because God promises to provide. Jesus follows by giving evidence of God fulfilling this promise. In verse 26, He tells us to “look at the birds of the air; they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.” God’s provision doesn’t exempt us from work. Birds work. They are among the busiest creatures. But they don’t worry about the work. They seek food as they need it and take what they find. And that is how we should be. What is prohibited is worry, not work. God promises to provide. Sometimes we aren’t satisfied with what He gives. Learning to trust God’s provision means learning contentment, trusting that what God gives is enough. Psalm 37:16 says “Better is the little of the righteous than the abundance of many wicked.” The Psalmist goes on to say that wealth of the wicked doesn’t last but that he has “not seen the righteous forsaken (Psalm 37:25).” God promises to provide, but what He provides is always daily bread.

Trust God’s Providence (vv. 30b-32)

Our inability to trust God to provide is rooted in our own fear that we are forgotten. What if God overlooks me, or forgets about me, or doesn’t care about me? That is why the entire preceding section is peppered with phrases like “Are you not worth much more than they? (v26)” and “will he not do much more...for you? (v. 30)” Jesus wants to remind us that we are extremely valuable to Him. In Matthew 10:29-31, Jesus reminds His followers, “²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰ But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹ So do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows.” Even the smallest bird is seen and valued by God. Every detail of our lives is known by God. We don’t need to fear.

Jesus invites us to stop centering our lives around frantically fulfilling our basic needs. Matthew 6:31-32 say, “³¹ Do not worry then, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear for clothing?’ ³² For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.”

God knows our needs and promises to provide. The word for this is providence. The root of this word is “video” which means “to see.” It literally means that God sees you and is looking out for you. We can trust God to do more than provide. We can trust him to know beforehand what we need. God isn’t waiting for us to tell him our needs. He is watching over us. We can trust His providence.

Trust God’s Priorities (v. 33)

Jesus concludes this section with a powerful promise that because God will provide, we are free to seek what He has for us. In verse 25, Jesus poses a question: “Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” Verse 33 gives us the answer to that question: “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” Our lives are meant to be spent seeking God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness, and when we do so, we will see His abundant provision in our lives.

Seeking God’s kingdom is something that we have already been encouraged to pray for. This whole sermon Jesus is giving is focused on what life in God’s kingdom is like. Seeking God’s kingdom means desiring it to come more and more in our midst, to see us drawn back to Him and serving Him and loving others. In order to seek God’s kingdom, though, we have to stop seeking our own. The biggest obstacle to God’s kingdom coming in our own lives is the persistent habit we all have to remain on the throne of our lives. Seeking God’s kingdom requires us to renounce our desire to build our own little kingdom and to submit to Him instead. Seeking God’s kingdom means wanting what God has for us more than what we want for ourselves. It is a supreme act of trust to believe that God knows better than we do what He made us for and where we will do the most good and find the greatest joy.

Seeking God’s righteousness is also something that has come up already in the Sermon on the mount. It is important to differentiate the two. Jesus invites us to seek God’s kingdom and His righteousness. Remember, God’s righteousness doesn’t mean rigid moralism where we try to force ourselves and others to be good on our own. We cannot be good apart from God. We need his help. Seeking kingdom righteousness means learning to seek the source of all life. It means abiding in Christ. The Christian life isn’t something we do on our own or by ourselves. As we draw closer to Jesus, His life flows to us and through us into the world.

Conclusion

How much of your life is spent chasing your tail or searching for that ever-elusive idea of “enough?” What would convince you to shift your trust and realize it’s not all up to you? God calls us to realize that His grand plan for this world includes specific provisions for us. He asks us to stop focusing on seeking our needs and to start seeking His kingdom. He promises when we do so, He will give us what we need. What are you seeking first? What would it take for you to start seeking first the kingdom and righteousness of God?

Discussion Questions:

1. In Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, where do we often place our relationship with God? Why? What do we put first?
2. How do we sometimes lose sight of the real meaning of life? Jesus says, “Is not life more than food?” How does this statement redirect our focus? From what to what?
3. How does trusting God to provide not exempt us from work? What does it mean then?
4. What does providence mean? What fear or need in our own life does it address?
5. What does it mean to seek God’s kingdom? What does it mean to seek God’s righteousness? What does it mean to seek it first?

Kingdom Judgement: Pearls and Swine

Matt. 7:1-6

If there is one verse people hostile to Christianity know, it's Matthew 7:1, which says, "Do not judge so that you will not be judged. " But for some reason, most people know the verse in the King James translation of the Bible: "Judge not, lest ye be judged."

This verse is used any time a Christian tries to speak Biblical truth that is opposed to current societal norms. It is used to silence believers on the grounds that this verse seems to tell us to keep our big mouths shut. People who are offended at what the Christian says lash out with "Who are you to say that?"

It is important to realize that using this verse in this way is self-contradictory. It is an act of judgement to judge me for judging someone else. Or to put it another way, the Christian could easily respond, "Who are you to say 'who are you to say that?'"

Though humorous, responding in such a way is belligerent and inflammatory and will only cause further damage to their perception of Christians. Because the truth is, source of many people's negative view of Christianity is the judgmental attitude adopted by many Christians.

The solution is not to do what the world is telling us to do, which is to reject all value judgements and cease standing for the truth. What we need to do is learn what this passage really means so we can learn the lesson Jesus wants us to learn so that as we stand for truth, we can do so in effective ways that transform people's lives and invite them into fellowship with us and with Jesus.

The first step in realizing what this verse means is to realize what it doesn't mean. It doesn't mean no Christian is supposed to exercise their critical faculties to make judgements or distinctions between good and bad, or right and wrong. Jesus is about to tell us to be watching out for dog, pigs, and wolves. In order to recognize them, we must learn to use our critical faculties to be able to make some sort of judgement.

If we read on, Jesus shows us what He means. He wants us to be able to judge things and people rightly. What He is forbidding is condemnation and being hypocritical.

Judge but Don't Condemn (vv. 1-2)

When Jesus said don't judge, He meant don't be judgmental. He is not commanding us to be blind, but rather encouraging us to be generous. He is forbidding His followers from being harsh and condemning.

Condemning means more than just pointing out a person's mistake. Condemning tells a person that they are a mistake. It tells them they are irredeemable, bad, and to be rejected. This wasn't true of us when Jesus saved us, and it isn't true of others either.

Sometimes our judgementalism is a response to other people's harsh treatment of us. In Luke 9:53-55, the disciples respond to the Samaritans in such a way: "53 But they [Samaritans] did not receive Him, because He was traveling toward Jerusalem. 54 When His disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" 55 But He turned and rebuked them, [and said, "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of; 56 for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them."] And they went on to another village." The disciples were guilty of passing a final judgement on those people and proposing to destroy them. It was the disciples not the Samaritans who got rebuked. Jesus came to save people not destroy them.

Most times, though, we don't intend to come off as condemning. We think we are simply speaking clearly and directly hoping to straighten the person out. But the root of such an approach is a self-righteous spirit, a feeling of superiority, a feeling that we are all right while others are not.

When we approach others with problems that need to be addressed, we should work very hard to avoid coming across as condescending or condemning. In Galatians 6:1, Paul writes, "Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; *each one* looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted." Paul calls us to be gentle with others and humble in respect to ourselves.

If we are not careful, we will become people who are hypercritical, delighting in criticism for its own sake and enjoying it. We will approach everyone and everything expecting to find fault, hoping to find fault. Such people never take the time to understand the circumstances, are never ready to pardon or overlook, and are never ready to exercise mercy in any way.

Jesus has already taught us, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." He will say later, in Matthew 7:12, "Treat people the same way you want them to treat you." Here, He tells us similarly: "¹ Do not judge so that you will not be judged. ² For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you (Matthew 7:1-2)."

Judge but Don't Be Hypocritical (vv. 3-5)

Jesus continues His exhortation to avoid judgementalism with an example about a person who critiques someone for having a speck of dust in their eye, but fails to realize there is a log in their own. He is pointing out our own fatal tendency to exaggerate the faults of others and minimize the gravity of our own.

Again, Jesus doesn't say the speck doesn't matter or that it is wrong of you to notice it. He is saying that it is wrong to treat the speck like it's important and the log like it's no big deal. This is the definition of being a hypocrite.

Hypocrite is a word that often gets used incorrectly. People often treat the word hypocrite as if it means one sinful person who points out the mistakes of another sinful person. Or we think it means one person pretending they are perfect while pointing out other people's flaws. The truth is that hypocrisy means applying one standard to yourself and another standard to other people. A hypocrite blames others while excusing themselves. We all do it. We accept our own excuses, because we know our weaknesses. Jesus wants us to do the same for others. That is why He told His followers in Matthew 22:29, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus isn't condemning criticism as such, but rather the criticism of others when we exercise no comparable self-criticism. When we confront our brother, we should do it as a loving brother anxious to rescue and to restore. Early Christian pastor, John Chrysostom said it this way: "Correct him but not as a foe, nor as an adversary exacting a penalty, but as a physician providing medicine." The speck really is in the brother's eye. But you will do more damage that good if you try to help him get it out without getting the log out of your eye first.

The answer to hypocrisy is humility. Before we start pointing out other people's flaws, we should seek help with the stuff in our own lives that we either excuse or maybe even can't see.

Judge and Be Careful (v. 6)

The last statement in this passage is more controversial and open to being misunderstood. Jesus tells us, "Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine." This has left many readers

wondering what are the holy things and pearls we are supposed to be careful with and who are the dogs and pigs we are supposed to avoid.

Jesus isn't referring to specific groups or classes of people who aren't worthy of being included into His kingdom. This is not a statement of exclusiveness; it is a statement about some practical difficulties in communication. He is warning His followers of a type of person who is persistently hostile. The response Jesus describes is the key: "Or they will trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces." We are supposed to watch out for people who will take the truth and disregard it, trampling it under foot, then turn and attack the person giving it to them.

Jesus is calling us to be careful in how and with whom we communicate. We aren't supposed to judge others but we are also not to ignore their faults. We need to recognize everyone is different. Some people we have to approach cautiously, if at all. Some people aren't open to hearing the truth and will respond destructively towards you. We should try to speak clearly and compassionately in ways people can hear and receive. We also need to realize when our words will fall on deaf ears and we will end up being torn to pieces. It is okay to avoid such confrontations.

Most importantly, we should ask ourselves if we are people who trample truth underfoot and attack its giver. Remember Jesus has just told us to stop condemning other and to realize that the log in your own eye might be bigger than the one in your brother's eye. Jesus is giving you truth, so are you going to respond like a pig and disregard it then come attack Him for telling you? Many people wonder who the dogs and pigs are. The first questions we need to ask is: Is it me?

Conclusion

God gave you a brain and expects you to use it. He wants us to be wise and compassionate. Jesus's call to avoid judging isn't about pretending everyone is okay. It's about encouraging us to show love and stay humble. Jesus came to seek and save the lost. Jesus came to be the great Physician who heals our souls. We get in His way and our own when we try to do His work for Him, when we overstep our bounds and condemn others, or act hypocritically towards them. In John 5:24, Jesus told His followers, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life." We are called to be messengers of that hope rather than instruments of condemnation.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How have you heard "judge not lest ye be judged" misused? What do people think it means? What is wrong with thinking this way?
2. What does condemnation mean? What is the difference between judging the way Jesus wants and condemning?
3. How do people misuse the term hypocrite? What does it really mean? How does hypocrisy keep us from judging like Jesus wants?
4. Why do we miss or excuse the log in our own eye? How can we get help seeing our blind spots?
5. What does the whole passage about pearl and swine mean? Have you ever experienced "casting your pearls before swine"? How can we make sure we don't act like swine when offered the pearls of truth?

Kingdom Requests: Ask, Seek, Knock

Matt. 7:7-12

One hot summer day I was working in the garage watching my kids play in the front yard, when one of my children came up to me complaining. One of her siblings had some cold treat that she wanted. “Why did you let her have that?” she asked angrily. My response took her by surprise, “Because she asked.” “Oh,” she responded indignantly, “Well, can I have one, too?” “Yes,” I responded, “I didn’t know you wanted one... here you go.” The child who was prepared to be outraged didn’t know how to respond when her sense of injustice was swallowed up by my granting her request.

That’s not fair! Why did they get that? I want some! We have all said these and other similar phrases at some point in our lives. When we see it in kids, we see how silly it looks, but the truth of the matter is such attitudes filter into adulthood. We compare our lives to other people. We see others succeed or attain something that we desperately want, so we become jealous of that other person, anxious or depressed about our own abilities, and disillusioned or frustrated with God.

We respond to others by trying to control and manipulate them. We respond to ourselves by anxiously trying to push ourselves harder or beating ourselves up when we fail. All the while wondering where God is and how come He doesn’t help. We come to church and look for ways to use God to get what we want.

In response to such attitudes, Jesus invites us to ask whatever we like from Him, encourages us to trust him as our Father, and frees us up to treat other people with kindness.

Free to Ask (v. 7)

These verses we are looking at today are connected with the ones that came before them. Jesus was teaching His followers to avoid judgementalism and to treat other people with love and compassion. Verse 12, at the end of today’s passage, completes the thought about how we are supposed to treat others. So, it is reasonable to assume that Jesus encouraging us to ask, seek, and knock is related to the issue of how we treat other people. Jesus is trying to teach us that some of our condemnation is rooted in what we believe to be unfairness. Someone else has something we want that we feel they don’t deserve, so we are harsh with them and bitter towards God.

James 4:1-2 says something similar: “¹ What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? ² You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask.”

We are jealous and envious, so we quarrel and fight. The answer in James is the same answer Jesus gives. Don’t envy; ask God. In Matthew 7:7, Jesus tells his disciples, “Ask and it will be given to you.” The Bible is full of bold statements regarding God and His willingness to bless His people. In Philippians 4:6, Paul says, “Let your requests be made known to God.” There is nothing wrong with asking. So instead of settling down into jealousy and resentment directed towards our neighbors, Jesus tells us to start by submitting our requests to God.

Free to Trust (vv. 8-11)

One common response people have is: “I asked God and He didn’t do what I asked; therefore I have a right to be upset at God or jealous of my neighbor.” James 3:3 says, “³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.” There is a difference between asking and telling. Asking God means submitting to his wisdom. Jesus goes on in Matthew 7 to describe three attributes of how God gives. The purpose of this passage is not to teach us a trick to ensure that we always

get God to give us exactly what we want every single time. Rather, Jesus is showing us who God is and inviting us to trust Him with what we ask of Him.

- **God Gives Generously (v. 8):** Verse 8 says, “Everyone who asks receives.” Everyone. It doesn’t say people who ask well, or people who ask nicely, or people who have been good. Everyone who asks receives. The reason is found not in the asker but in the Giver. God gives because it is in His nature to be generous. James 1:5 describes God as the one “who gives to all generously and without reproach.” He doesn’t judge your worthiness or begrudge your need. He loves giving. Earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5:45, Jesus tells His disciples to copy the generosity and love of God, who “causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”
- **God Gives Like a Father (vv. 9-11):** God isn’t a bank, or a government agency, or a concierge. You don’t look for ways of bribing, or coercing, or ordering him to do what you want. God gives like a father. That means He is not mechanical or magical, but rather personal and motivated by love. It also means He is in control, not us. We come to Him humbly as His children, not arrogantly like His customers, or angrily like His employer. We ask but don’t demand. We ask and trust that our Father knows us, love us, and will bless us with what is good.
- **God Gives What is Good (vv. 9-11):** We are sometimes mistaken about what will fulfill our needs. We ask God for something because we think it is what we want. God knows when we are mistaken. That seems to be what is going on with the analogy in verses 9-10 where Jesus says, “9 What man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he?” What is the connection between stones and bread or between fish and snakes? Well, the style of loaves cooked in Judea in Jesus’s day looked like stones. There is also a kind of catfish that lives in the Sea of Galilee that looks a lot like an eel. Imagine a child pointing at a stone or an eel and saying to their father, “Daddy, can I have that?” The father is not going to give the child what they asked for, because they are mistaken. The father will give the thing that they actually need. The way that translates to us is that we don’t always ask for the right thing. James 4:3 says, “You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives.” God doesn’t promise to give us whatever we want. He promises to give us what is good. He isn’t withholding good from us. He just sometimes knows better than us what will truly satisfy us. There is a line in the old hymn, “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty,” that says, “Hast thou not seen, how all thy longings have been, granted in what He ordaineth.” God hears our requests, knows our needs, and gives us what He knows will be for our good. In the midst of rejection or refusal, we need to be willing to analyze our own motives and trust the wisdom and love of God.

Free to Love (v. 12)

This section culminates with what is called the Golden Rule: Treat people the same way you want them to treat you. The Golden Rule is more than a nice bit of ethics. Jesus says that it is the whole point of the “Law and the Prophets.” Sin causes us to treat other people differently than we would want to be treated. Jesus tells us if we could live this out, we would fulfill the whole reason the law was given.

It should be obvious that the reason the law and prophets had to be given was because we can’t do it on our own. That is the meaning of the “therefore” in verse 12. This rule isn’t a disconnected piece of moral philosophy. It is the culmination of what Jesus has been building up to in chapter 7 of the Sermon on the Mount. We judge, criticize, condemn, and tear each other to pieces. Why? Because we are jealous, envious, worried and afraid that other people have it better than us and that we are missing out on our change to be happy. When we realize we can submit our requests to God and trust Him to give us what we need, we will be able to live out verse 12.

Conclusion

Parts of the Sermon on the Mount are repeated in Luke’s Gospel as well. This passage has one interesting

difference in Luke's version. In Luke 11:13, Jesus says, "13 If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?" Notice the change. "Give what is good" has been changed to "give the Holy Spirit." They mean the same thing. God knows we are hungry. He knows we will only be satisfied when we are in relationship with Him. He knows that once we are in relationship with Him and have the Holy Spirit in us, we will be free to love others because all the things we are fighting and quarreling over will find their proper place.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How does this section about asking God for things connect to the previous section?
2. What does it mean that God gives generously? As a father? What is good?
3. Have you ever been mistaken about what you need or what will fulfill you? Have you ever been glad God didn't answer your request? How can we learn to trust God when He doesn't do what we ask?
4. What does the Golden Rule mean? How does it fulfill the "Law and Prophets"? How do we sometimes misunderstand it? What do we need to live it out?
5. What is the difference between God giving "what is good" and God giving "the Holy Spirit"? Why is the Holy Spirit the ultimate good?

Kingdom Choice: Enter by the Narrow Gate

Matt 7:13-14

I love maps. I always have. I remember being in kindergarten, sitting at my kitchen table tracing a map of Texas, then labelling it. I remember being in elementary school, sitting in the passenger seat of our family car looking at a roadmap trying to figure out what town was next on our family road trip. I loved looking at an atlas trying to plot the best route. Before google maps, people consulted atlases to try to find the best route. There even used to be roads that had green dots along them that indicated that highway as a “scenic route.” Such routes might take longer, but the beautiful drive might make up for the slight detour.

Whether you choose to take the most direct route and get there as fast as possible with the fewest stops, or you decide to take a more scenic route and make a few stops along the way, the most important factor in route planning is the destination. Easy, comfortable, or enjoyable routes are only good things if they still get you to the destination. Hard, difficult, or dull roads are endurable as long as they do get you to where you want to go.

When it comes to the destination of life, many in our society don't think there is one. They say things like “life is about the journey” and “enjoy the ride.” But just like a good road trip, it's hard to enjoy your life if you don't know where you are headed. “Where you are headed” means more than just what happens to you when you die. It means, what kind of life will you have? No matter how much fun you try to pack into life, unless you have a clear picture of where you are trying to get to, you will ultimately end in heartache.

Life is about choice. Learning to choose well is essential. Many people feel lost and don't know which way to go. In today's passage, Jesus shows His followers the right way to take. He is coming to the end of His Sermon. It has been full of teaching that ran contrary to many people's expectations. Now He issues a challenge. The last few verses of the Sermon on the Mount point us in the right direction and tell us we have a choice to make.

Following Jesus Leads to Life – “the way...that leads to life”

Jesus presents His followers a choice between two paths. The first question of any path should be not how comfortable or easy it is, but where does it go? Jesus says that these two paths lead to opposite destinations. One leads to life, the other to destruction.

Sometimes we focus too much on the path that leads to destruction and misunderstand what Jesus is saying. He isn't saying that He will punish everyone that takes the wrong path. He is saying that path naturally heads towards destruction. Destruction and Death are not an external and arbitrary decree of God imposed on people who mistakenly make a poor choice. Jesus said in John 3:17, “For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.” God didn't send Jesus to judge to world. He doesn't have to judge sin because sin judges itself. Paul wrote in Romans 6:23, “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” God gives life, not death. It is sin that gives death. Death is the wages that sin pays out.

Jesus isn't threatening hell in His choice of two paths. He is offering life. We need to realize that Hell is not an evangelism strategy. Yes, Hell exists. But Jesus doesn't use it to persuade people to follow Him. To people whose lives are broken by sin, He offers to point them towards the path to life. That is what He is saying in this passage.

We are all looking for the path that will lead us to life. Most of us are just mistaken about what actually brings life. Jesus isn't trying to scare you. He is trying to show you the way. The way out of the mess you have

already gotten yourself into. They way towards the fulfilment, purpose and joy that you have always been seeking. The way to life.

Following Jesus Is a Choice – “Enter by the narrow gate”

In order to find life, the first step is realizing that following Jesus is a choice. It doesn't happen magically or accidentally or naturally. We live in a fallen world and we are all born just a little bit broken. That is what Christian theologians mean by the term “original sin.” Like a baby born addicted to drugs, we are all born already with a predisposition to prefer sin. In order to find life, we have to do more than go with our gut, or follow our instincts because we desire things that we shouldn't. We have to choose to follow Jesus. We have to make a conscious decision to start listening to what He says and following where He leads. That choice means refusing to listen to competing voices, the loudest of which is usually our own flawed selves. That is why Proverbs 3:5-6 tells us: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight.”

We live in a society that tells us that the things the majority of people do are “normal” and “natural” and so, by extension, “positive.” The Biblical perspective is that though certain things might be common in a society or even desired by a large group, they can still be quite harmful. We are often poor judges of what is best for us. When we follow our own inclinations or things our culture tells us are good, we are in danger of finding the destructive way Jesus warned us about. The way to destruction is easy, comfortable, uncontroversial. It affirms whatever you want to do and makes few restrictions on you. Jesus says that in order to find life, you have to go against the grain of your sinful nature and choose what God wants which may sound or feel counterintuitive.

Following Jesus Is Limiting – “The gate is small”

Jesus says that there is a gate at the entrance to the path that leads to life. Gates restrict those who enter. I remember seeing a parking lot with a metal gate about 9 feet high around the entrance. There was nothing in the parking lot that was as high as the gate. I couldn't figure out why the gate was there. Then I saw a sign posted which said, “No 18-wheelers.” The gate was there to limit the kinds of vehicles that had access to the parking lot. When Jesus says the gate is narrow, He is telling us that walking this path limits what you can carry. In order to follow Jesus, we are going to have to put some things down. Some things just don't belong on the Jesus path. The Biblical word for this is “sin.” Other things may not be bad in and of themselves, but they are keeping us from following well. A good word for this is “encumbrance.”

In Hebrews 12:1, we are encouraged to “lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us,” in order to be free to run the race God has for us. Imagine an athlete trying to compete still wearing his warm ups. Or worse, dressed in the baggy clothes he wears at home to lounge around the house. There is nothing wrong with the way he is dressed, but it will keep him from running the race well. If we are going to follow the path that God has for us, we need to put down the things that are weighing us down.

- **Sin** – Sin is simply things that are wrong for all people everywhere to engage in. Sometimes, though, we excuse our sin by saying things like, “We are only human” or “God forgives.” Both are true. God does know our weakness. God does love and forgive us. But God didn't send Jesus so that we could be comfortable in sin. He came to wage war on sin and He calls us to hate it as much as He does because sin entangles us. It trips us up and keeps us from running our race well. We are called to fight against it, to lay it aside, and not to grow comfortable in it.
- **Encumbrances** – We are also called to lay aside encumbrances. An encumbrance is a hindrance, a burden or something that restricts your motion. In sports, it's running in big bulky clothes or while wearing a backpack. There is nothing wrong with any of those, but in the circumstances, they will get in the way. In life, an encumbrance is anything that isn't necessarily sin yet keeps you from running your race well. Someone else might be able to engage in the activity without problem, but for you it has become a hindrance. This category is tricky because it calls us to change our mindset from “Will I get in trouble for this?” to “Is this going to help me run well?” Everything in life is either wing or

weight. Everything is either helping you to be the person God is calling you to be, or it is holding you back. We need to prayerfully ask God and our neighbors to show us those things that are keeping us from running our race well. We then need the courage to lay them aside, no matter how precious they are to us. Encumbrances can take the form of jobs, activities, movies, music. Anything that is causing you to not be the person God desires you to be. What is hard is that something that might be an encumbrance for you might not be for someone else. It takes discernment, honesty, and sacrifice in order to discover and lay aside encumbrances. But we have to do it if we want to run the race that God has for us.

Following Jesus Is Restrictive – “The way is narrow”

The easy path has a broad gate. It won't limit what you can take. It won't change you. It won't put restrictions on you. The path has no curbs, no boundaries. The path is easy to find and you are free to go in whatever direction you feel comfortable. All you need to do is follow your own inclinations and desires. No effort is needed.

In contrast to this, Jesus describes His path as narrow. It has restrictions and difficulties. He will tell you which way to go. You will have to go against your nature and desires at times. It may be hard or feel unnatural. Realizing that Jesus is leading you on a path that leads to life helps us understand why grace is free but we are still called to obedience. We don't obey the commandments of Jesus in order to be accepted by Him. We obey His commandments because living life is walking along a narrow path and we don't want to fall off a cliff.

God's commandments were given out of love for us and for the purpose of giving us joy. Obeying Him is an act of trust not fear. In John 15:9-11, Jesus says ⁹ Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. ¹⁰ If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. ¹¹ These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.”

The early 20th century Christian author GK Chesterton once famously wrote, “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.” If you were picking paths based on comfort, you would pick the other path. But the main reason to pick a path is because of the destination. This road leads to life. But it's a hard road, a narrow road, a road of obedience to Jesus. Like any dangerous path, you will only have the courage to walk it if you eagerly desire to reach the destination and you have confidence in your guide to show you the way.

Following Jesus Is Solitary – “There are few who find it”

Each phrase in these few verses is controversial. But this last one has the potential to cause the most consternation. What do you mean few find the path to life? Did God intentionally create a world where it is hard to find life so most people miss it? Do most people go to Hell? All of these are honest, even if sometimes angry, questions that are important to answer. Here are some attempts to answer these questions and at the same time probe deeper into the meaning of this passage.

First, God loves everyone. We teach our children John 3:16 then promptly forget it ourselves. “For God so loved the world...” God's primary reason for acting in the world is His love for everything He has made. So, when there are passages in the Bible like this one which say, “few find it,” we need to place that verse in the context of all that we know of God and His love. 2 Peter 3:9 says, “The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.” Luke 15:3-7 describes God as a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to go look for 1 lost one. This reminds us that when Jesus says “few find it,” He isn't talking like a statistician but like a father. 99 out of 100 is a good percentage. A statistician would be glad of such a high success rate. A father still feels the loss. We don't know if only a minority of people will be saved. We aren't supposed to. What we do know is that some, by their own choice, will reject God and even one is one too many for God and it breaks His heart.

Second, following Jesus requires seeking. God created a world where you can have real freedom. He does this by not compelling your obedience through His overwhelming presence. He has left enough of Himself in the world to encourage people to seek Him. He has left enough of Himself out of the world to allow selfish, sinful people to go on about their business. You must look for the path that leads to life, you have to want it, and you have to be willing to work for it. Seeking God isn't something you do in your spare time. It is something that you make the primary focus of your life or it is doomed to failure. Jeremiah 29:13 says, "You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart."

Last, following Jesus is not always popular. If you are using societal norms as an indicator of which path to follow, you are more likely to find an easy path that leads you someplace you don't want to go. We all need help finding our direction. We need mentors and role-models who can show us the way and help us get back on track when we get lost. But we need to realize that following Jesus will not always lead to worldly success or approval. The path that Jesus calls us to walk may be solitary sometimes. We need to be prepared for that so when the rest of the world is headed in one direction, we aren't startled into disobedience by the realization that we are standing by ourselves on a lonely path. The same Jesus who calls us to walk this path promises to be with us always (Matt 28:20).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Do you have a story about picking a path based on ease of travel only to find out it led somewhere terrible?
How about a story of a hard path that led to a great destination?
2. How do some people find the wrong path simply by failing to make a choice?
3. What does it mean that the gate is small? What is the difference between sin and encumbrances?
How can we learn to spot our encumbrances?
4. What does it mean that the way is narrow? How does God's path restrict us?
Why does God's path restrict us?
5. What does "few are those who find it" mean? How might it be misunderstood?

Kingdom Foundations: House on the Rock

Matt 7:15-27

During the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln, attended a church not far from the White House on Wednesday nights. To escape attention and scrutiny, the preacher, Dr. Gurley, allowed the president to sit in his study with the door open to the sanctuary so that he could listen to the sermon without being noticed.

One evening while walking back to the White House, a friend asked him what he thought of the evening's sermon. "Well," Lincoln answered, "it was brilliantly conceived, biblical, relevant, and well presented." "So, it was a great sermon?" the companion responded. "No," Lincoln replied. "It failed. It failed because Dr. Gurley did not ask us to do something great."

This story reveals an important dimension to every sermon. A sermon fails if there is no invitation to respond by doing something different with your life based on what you heard. Any sermon, no matter how eloquent or engaging or well researched or biblically based, without a call to respond by living differently, is just another form of entertainment, something we listen to for a little while to pass the time and relieve the boredom.

It should be no surprise then that Jesus ends His most famous sermon with a call to live life differently. He challenges His listeners to be cautious who they listen to and be careful they aren't deceiving themselves by failing to hear His teaching and act on them.

Don't Let Others Mislead You (vv. 15-20)

Jesus warns His followers to be aware that other people will try to deceive them. These false teachers appear to belong but their hearts reveal something else. The proof of whether or not someone is a false prophet is not whether they know the right words or teach things that sound pleasing. Jesus says, "You will know them by their fruit." What they produce reveals who they are.

Jesus issues a similar warning in John 10:10, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." In this passage He calls false prophets "thieves" and describes how to spot them. A thief is a person who uses subtlety and trickery to deceive people. The thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy. These 3 verbs describe the motivation of a person who is a thief/robbery.

- **A Thief Takes Things: "a thief comes...to steal"** – A thief shows up at your house because you have something they want. A thief sees a thing and believes he is justified in taking it. A thief might act kind and gentle and loving, but he is motivated by his desire to take from you what he wants. His primary goal is acquisition.
- **A Thief Uses People: "a thief comes...to kill"** – Because a thief's goal is to get things for himself, he ends up dehumanizing others. A thief turns people into things to be used to get what he wants. They are expendable. The most extreme view of human life being expendable is to kill somebody.
- **A Thief Makes Messes: "a thief comes...to destroy"** – A thief doesn't care about you or your house. He barges in and takes what he wants. While he is looking for the valuables, most thieves make huge messes. Why? Because they don't care about anything other than what they are looking to take.

In addition to being aware that false prophets exist, we also need to be mindful of why false teachers are so attractive. In 2 Timothy 4:3-4 Paul issues the following warning to Timothy: "3 The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, 4 and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside

to myths.” False prophets prosper because they tell us things that we want to hear. They tickle our ears with what Paul class “myths” which simply means stories we prefer to hear and want to believe about ourselves, others, God, and the world.

Don't Mislead Yourself (vv. 21-23)

In order to be fully aware of false prophets, we also need to be aware of the weakness in ourselves that make them attractive to us. That is why Jesus proceeds from talking about avoiding having others deceive us to avoiding deceiving ourselves. He tells the heartbreaking story of people who will appeal to Him for entrance in the Kingdom of Heaven feeling like they deserve it but will be sent away because they have deceived themselves.

- **Action Means More Than Words (v.21)**: Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven.” A lot of people like to talk about religion, but fewer people want to do it. Jesus says what matters most is not what you say but what you do. James 1:22 says, “But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.” One sneaky type of false religion masquerades as taking religion seriously. This kind of false religion loves acquiring Bible facts, but the knowledge never translates into changed behavior. In James 2:19, James says emphatically, “You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.” Education is good. Learning as much as you can about your faith is a great thing. But knowledge doesn't save. Demons know very clearly who God is. They just don't follow Him. Jesus says that the ones who enter the kingdom of heaven are those who “do the will of My father who is in heaven.” In 1 Thessalonians 4:3, Paul writes, “This is the will of God, your sanctification.” What is sanctification? Becoming like Christ, pursuing righteousness, being obedient to God's commands. That is why in 2 Timothy 2:19, Paul tells Timothy: “Everyone who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness.” Knowledge is only good if it changes your life and lead you to obedience.
- **Relationship Means More Than Resume (vv. 22-23)**: Jesus says, “22 Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ 23 And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you.’” A lot of people will try to show Jesus their spiritual resume as proof that they belong to Him. They will say, “Look at all the great stuff we did for you, Jesus.” Jesus responds that He doesn't know these people. Jesus is inviting us into His kingdom. In order to enter His kingdom, we must leave our own. Often, instead of trying to renounce the throne of our own kingdom, we just try to stamp a cross on it. We still want to be kings. We want to be famous, important, wealthy, successful. We just promise to do it for Jesus. We try to impress Jesus with how many Bible studies we attended, how many small groups we lead, how many mission trips we went on, how many books we wrote. We aren't doing God's will. We are doing our own will and using Jesus to justify it. We aren't building His kingdom. We are building our own but trying to add some Christian flavor to it. The harsh reality is that what Jesus is describing is a recipe for how to make yourself into a false prophet without even knowing it. We are called to pursue relationship with Jesus first. In Luke 10:20, Jesus tells His followers something similar. They are celebrating all the amazing things that they saw on their mission trip. He says to them, “Nevertheless do not rejoice in this... but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven.” Focus first on who you are, rather than on what you do. You are a child of God. Start There. Everything flows from that.

What Are You Building Your Life On?

Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount with a parable of two houses. One built on a strong foundation of rock; the other built on sand. Jesus doesn't say that the houses themselves are any different. He also doesn't say that the storms and floods that affect them are any different. The only difference is what they are built on.

Jesus is asking us to examine the foundations we have built our lives upon. Many in our society and even in our churches are very willing to accept the statement “Jesus is the answer.” But some haven’t fully considered what questions Jesus is the answer to. We think Jesus is the answer to questions like “How do I get into heaven?” or maybe more honestly “How do I miss hell?” or “What happens to me when I die?” or “Who do you turn to when you have no other choices or chances?” Don’t get me wrong, Jesus is the answer to these questions. But He is the answer to so much more.

When we narrow Jesus to the answer to just a few questions, we begin looking elsewhere for answers to the other big questions: “What is meaningful to spend my life doing? What is most important in life? Where do we seek fulfillment?”

When we stop looking to Jesus, our identity in Christ becomes secondary. It becomes secondary because we are focused on seeking answers to the important questions in other places. Those areas where we think we have found answers become the primary way we understand ourselves and our identity. They become the foundations upon which we are building our lives.

Jesus is telling us to take every aspect of our lives and ground it in our identity as His followers. Such a task takes time. That is why He describes it as building a house. We must go slow and make sure every piece of our lives finds its foundation in Him.

Finally, notice that Jesus doesn’t promise that following Him will be free from trouble. The same storms and floods hit both houses. What He promises is confidence in the midst of the storm and victory after the storm. In John 16:33, He tells His follows on the eve of His crucifixion, “These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation but take courage; I have overcome the world.”

Where do we start? Jesus gives us the starting point: “Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them.” Building your life upon the rock means trusting that Jesus knows the best way for us to live our lives. It means trusting Him and not ourselves. It simply means doing what He says most of all. It’s almost like Jesus is telling us to go back to the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount and read it again.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How can we spot false prophets? What fruit or evidence should we be looking for? Why do we sometimes find false prophets appealing and attractive?
2. What does it mean to deceive ourselves? How can we avoid this?
3. What does it mean to “show God our spiritual resume?” How do we try to use God to build our kingdom? How can we pursue relationship with Jesus first?
4. How can we know what foundations our lives our built upon? How can we make sure our lives are founded on the rock?
5. Does following Jesus free us from experiencing the “storms” of life? What does He promise?