



THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO
M A T T H E W



PART 3

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Lesson 19 (5-12-24)

Christian Influence: Salt and Light (Matthew 5:13-16)

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

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

- Matthew 5:13-16 ESV

The metaphors of salt and light are the first explicit indications that the presence of the kingdom produces changed lives. As Jesus’ disciples go into the world as salt, the reality of their profession is evident in the nature of their lives. True disciples will never lose what made them disciples, because they are changed people, sinners made new by the life of the kingdom of heaven. False disciples, however, who simply attempt to put on the flavoring of the kingdom life, will be revealed. Their salt is only an external flavoring, not a real personal change. These impostors cannot be made salty again because they never belonged to the kingdom in the first place. Jesus’ disciples, called to be the light of the world, have the kingdom life within them as a living testimony to those in the world who do not yet have the light. The good works of true disciples are produced by the light-life from God; these works are not of the disciples’ own making, because those who see these good works will glorify their Father in heaven.¹

Discussion Questions

Before refrigeration, salt was used to keep meat from rotting. What then does Jesus’ statement “You are the salt of the earth” (v. 13) tell us about society and the church’s role in it?

What has been in the news lately that indicates society is rotting and decaying?

What are some practical ways we can function as salt where we live and work?

What might cause Christians to lose their saltiness?

¹ David Gundersen, “Psalms,” in *The NIV Grace and Truth Study Bible*, ed. R. Albert Mohler Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 1296.

Jesus' second statement is, "You are the light of the world" (v. 14). As salt, we prevent decay and the spread of evil. How does the church's role as light complement its role as salt?

How can we positively promote the spread of truth in the world?

Why might we be tempted to hide our light (v. 15)?

What happens when salt and light are not used as intended?

What is the result, according to Jesus, of people seeing our good deeds (v. 16)?

What relationship do you see between the Beatitudes and our role as salt and light in society?

What is one way you can begin having a stronger influence as salt and light?

Was there anything from last week's sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from *John Stott, ed., The Message of the Sermon on the Mount: Christian Counter-Culture, Revised Edition., The Bible Speaks Today (London: IVP, 2020), 40–50.*]

If the Beatitudes describe the essential character of the disciples of Jesus, the salt and light metaphors indicate their influence for good in the world. Yet the very idea that Christians can exert a healthy influence in the world should bring us up with a start. What possible influence could the people described in the Beatitudes exert in this hard, tough world? What lasting good can the poor and the meek do, the mourners and the merciful, and those who try to make peace not war? Would they not simply be overwhelmed by the flood of evil? What can be accomplished by those whose only passion is an appetite for righteousness, and whose only weapon is purity of heart? Are not such people too feeble to achieve anything, especially if they are a small minority in the world?

It is clear that Jesus did not share this skepticism. Rather the reverse. The world will undoubtedly persecute the church (10–12); yet it is the church's calling to serve this

persecuting world (13–16). Incredible as it may sound, Jesus referred to that handful of Palestinian peasants as the salt of *the earth* and the light of *the world*, so far-reaching was their influence to be. It is also a remarkable providence of God that in this most Jewish of the four Gospels there should be such an allusion to the whole earth, to the worldwide power for good of Christ's followers.

In order to define the nature of their influence, Jesus made use of two domestic metaphors. Every home, however poor, used and still uses both salt and light. During his own boyhood Jesus must often have watched his mother use salt in the kitchen and light the lamps when the sun went down. Salt and light are indispensable household commodities. The need for light is obvious. Salt, on the other hand, had a variety of uses. It was both a condiment and a preservative. It seems to have been recognized from time immemorial as an essential component of human diet and as a seasoning or relish to food: 'Is tasteless food eaten without salt?' In particular, however, in the centuries before refrigeration had been invented, it was used to keep meat wholesome and to prevent decay.

The basic truth which lies behind these metaphors and is common to them both is that the church and the world are distinct communities. On the one hand there is 'the earth'; on the other there is 'you' who are the earth's salt. On the one hand there is 'the world'; on the other there is 'you' who are the world's light. It is true that the two communities ('they' and 'you') are related to each other, but their relatedness depends on their distinctness. It is important to assert this clearly in our day in which it is theologically fashionable to blur the distinction between the church and the world, and to refer to all humanity indiscriminately as 'the people of God'.

Furthermore, the metaphors tell us something about both communities. The world is evidently a dark place, with little or no light of its own since an external source of light is needed to illumine it. True, it is 'always talking about its enlightenment', but much of its boasted light is, in reality, darkness. The world also demonstrates a constant tendency to deteriorate. The idea is not that the world is tasteless, and that Christians can make it less insipid, but that it is going rotten. It cannot stop itself from going bad. Only salt introduced from outside can do this. The church, on the other hand, is set in the world with a double role, as salt to arrest—or at least to hinder—the process of social decay, and as light to dispel the darkness.

When we look at the two metaphors more closely, we see that they are deliberately phrased in order to be parallel to each other. In each case Jesus first makes an affirmation ('You are the salt of the earth', 'You are the light of the world'). Then he adds a rider, the condition on which the affirmation depends (the salt must retain its saltiness, the light must be allowed to shine). Salt is good for nothing if its saltiness is lost; light is good for nothing if it is concealed.

1. The salt of the earth (5:13)

The affirmation is straightforward: *You are salt of the earth*. This means that, when each community is itself and is true to itself, the world decays like rotten fish or meat, while the church can hinder its decay.

Of course, God has set other restraining influences in the community. He has himself established certain institutions in his common grace, which curb our selfish tendencies and prevent society from slipping into anarchy. Chief among these is the state (with its authority to frame and enforce laws) and the home (including marriage and family life). These exert a wholesome influence in the community. Nevertheless, God intends the most powerful of all restraints within sinful society to be his own redeemed, regenerate, and righteous people.

The effectiveness of salt, however, is conditional: it must retain its saltiness. Now, strictly speaking, salt can never lose its saltiness. Sodium chloride is a very stable chemical compound which is resistant to nearly every attack. Nevertheless, it can become contaminated by mixture with impurities, and then it becomes useless, even dangerous. Desalted salt is unfit even for manure, that is, the compost heap. Dr David Turk has suggested to me that what was then popularly called 'salt' was in fact a white powder (perhaps from around the Dead Sea) which, while containing sodium chloride, also contained much else, since, in those days, there were no refineries. Of this dust the sodium chloride was probably the most soluble component and so the most easily washed out. The residue of white powder still looked like salt, and was doubtless still called salt, but it neither tasted nor acted like salt. It was just road dust.

So too a Christian. 'Have salt among yourselves,' Jesus said on another occasion. Christian saltiness is Christian character as depicted in the Beatitudes, committed Christian discipleship demonstrated in both deed and word.⁴ To be effective Christians must retain their Christlikeness, as salt must retain its saltiness. If Christians become assimilated to non-Christians and contaminated by the impurities of the world, they lose their influence. The influence of Christians in and on society depends on their being distinct, not identical. Dr Lloyd-Jones emphasizes this:

The glory of the gospel is that when the Church is absolutely different from the world, she invariably attracts it. It is then that the world is made to listen to her message, though it may hate it at first.

Otherwise, if we Christians are indistinguishable from non-Christians, we are useless. We might as well be discarded like saltless salt, *thrown out and trampled underfoot*. 'But what a downcome,' comments A. B. Bruce, 'from being saviors of society to supplying materials for footpaths!'

2. The light of the world (5:14–16)

Jesus introduces his second metaphor with a similar affirmation: *You are the light of the world.* It's true that he was later to say, 'I am the light of the world.' But by derivation we are too, shining with the light of Christ, shining in the world like stars in the night sky. I sometimes think how splendid it would be if non-Christians, curious to discover the secret and source of our light, were to come up to us and enquire:

*Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are!*

What this light is Jesus clarifies as our *good deeds*. Let other people once *see your good deeds*, he said, and they will *glorify your Father in heaven*, for it is by such good deeds that our light is to shine. It seems that *good deeds* are a general expression to cover everything Christians say and do because they are Christians, every outward and visible manifestation of their Christian faith. Since light is a common biblical symbol of truth, a Christian's shining light must surely include spoken testimony. So, the Old Testament prophecy that God's Servant would be 'a light for the Gentiles [or 'nations']' is said to have been fulfilled not only in Christ himself, the light of the world, but also by Christians who bear witness to Christ. Evangelism must be counted as one of the 'good deeds' by which our light shines and our Father is glorified...

It is healthy to be reminded that believing, confessing, and teaching the truth are also 'good works' which give evidence of our regeneration by the Holy Spirit. We must not limit them to these, however. 'Good deeds' are works of love as well as of faith. They express not only our loyalty to God, but our care for other people as well. Indeed, the primary meaning of 'deeds' must be practical, visible deeds of compassion. It is when people see these, Jesus said, that they will glorify God, for they embody the good news of his love which we proclaim. Without them our gospel loses its credibility and our God his honor.

As with the salt, so with the light, the affirmation is followed by a condition: *let your light shine before others*. If salt can lose its saltiness, the light in us can become darkness. But we are to allow the light of Christ within us to shine out from us, so that people may see it. We are not to be like a town or village nestling in a valley whose lights are concealed from view, but like *a town built on a hill which cannot be hidden* and whose lights are clearly seen for miles around. Again, we are to be like a lighted lamp, 'a lamp that burned and gave light' as John the Baptist was, which is set on its stand in a prominent position in the house so that *it gives light to everyone in the house*, and is not stuck *under a bowl* where it can do no good.

This means that, as the disciples of Jesus, we are not to conceal the truth we know or the truth of what we are. We are not to pretend to be other than we are but be willing for our Christianity to be visible to all. 'Flight into the invisible is a denial of the call. A community of Jesus which seeks to hide itself has ceased to follow him.' Rather we are to be ourselves, our true Christian selves, openly living the life described in the Beatitudes, and not ashamed of Christ. Then people will see us and our good deeds and seeing us will glorify God. For they will

inevitably recognize that it is by the grace of God we are what we are, that *our* light is *his* light, and that what *we* do is what *he* does in us and through us. So, it is the light they will praise, not the lamp which bears it; it is our Father in heaven whom they will glorify, not the children he has begotten and who exhibit a certain family likeness. Even those who revile us may not be able to help glorifying God for the very righteousness on account of which they persecute us (10–12).

3. Lessons to learn

The salt and light metaphors which Jesus used have much to teach us about our Christian responsibilities in the world. Three lessons are prominent.

A. There is a fundamental difference between _____ and _____, between the _____ and the _____

It is true that some non-Christians adopt a deceptive veneer of Christian culture. Some professing Christians, on the other hand, seem indistinguishable from non-Christians and so deny their Christian name by their non-Christian behavior. Yet the essential difference remains. We might say that they are as different as chalk from cheese. Jesus said they are as different as light from darkness, as different as salt from decay and disease. We serve neither God, nor ourselves, nor the world by attempting to obliterate or even minimize this difference.

This theme is basic to the Sermon on the Mount, which is built on the assumption that Christians *are* different, and it issues a call to us to *be* different. Probably the greatest tragedy of the church throughout its long and chequered history has been its constant tendency to conform to the prevailing culture instead of developing a Christian counter-culture.

B. We must _____ the _____ which this distinction puts upon us

Our responsibility really stands out when in each metaphor we bring the affirmation and the condition together. Each affirmation begins in the Greek sentence with the emphatic pronoun ‘you’, as much as to say ‘you and only you’ are the earth’s salt and the world’s light. And *therefore*—the condition follows with inexorable logic—you simply must not fail the world you are called to serve. You must be what you are. You are salt, and so you must retain your saltiness and not lose your Christian flavor. You are light, and so you must let your light shine and not conceal it in any way, whether by sin or by compromise, by laziness or by fear.

This call to assume our Christian responsibility, because of what God has made us and where he has put us, is particularly relevant to young people who feel frustrated in the modern world. The problems of the human community are so great, and they feel so small, so feeble, so ineffective.

What message do we have, then, for such people who feel themselves strangled by ‘the system’, crushed by the machine of modern technology, overwhelmed by political, social, and

economic forces which control them and over which they have no control? They feel themselves victims of a situation they are powerless to change. What can they do? It is in the soil of this frustration that radicals are being bred, dedicated to the violent overthrow of the system. It is from the very same soil that radicals for Jesus can arise, equally dedicated activists—even more so—but committed rather to spread his revolution of love, joy and peace. And this peaceful revolution is more thorough than any programme of violence, both because its standards are incorruptible and because it changes people as well as structures. Have we lost our confidence in the power of the gospel of Christ? Then listen to Luther: ‘With his single word I can be more defiant and boastful than they with all their power, swords and guns.’

So we are not helpless and powerless after all! For we have Jesus Christ, his gospel, ideals and power, and Jesus Christ is all the salt and light this dark and rotten world needs. But we must have salt in ourselves, and we must let our light shine.

C. We must see our Christian _____ as twofold

‘Salt and light have one thing in common: they give and expend themselves—and thus are the opposite of any and every kind of self-centered religiosity.’ Nevertheless, the kind of service each brings is different. In fact, their effects are complementary. The function of salt is largely negative: it prevents decay. The function of light is positive: it illuminates the darkness.

So, Jesus calls his disciples to exert a double influence on the secular community, a negative influence by arresting its decay and a positive influence by bringing light into its darkness. For it is one thing to stop the spread of evil; it is another to promote the spread of truth, beauty and goodness.

Putting the two metaphors together, it seems right to see in them the proper relation between evangelism and social action in the total mission of Christ in the world—a relation which perplexes many Christians today. We are called to be both salt and light to the secular community.

Take first our vocation to be salt. The apostle Paul paints a grim picture at the end of the first chapter of his Roman letter of what happens when society suppresses (out of love for evil) the truth it knows by nature. It deteriorates. Its values and standards steadily decline until it becomes utterly corrupt. When people reject what they know of God, God gives them up to their own distorted notions and perverted passions, until society stinks in the nostrils of God and of all good people.

Christians are set in secular society by God to hinder this process. God intends us to penetrate the world. Christian salt has no business to remain snugly in elegant little ecclesiastical salt cellars; our place is to be rubbed into the secular community, as salt is rubbed into meat, to stop it going bad. And when society does go bad, we Christians tend to throw up our hands in pious horror and reproach the non-Christian world; but should we not rather reproach

ourselves? No-one blames unsalted meat for going bad! It cannot do anything else. The real question to ask is: where is the salt?

Jesus was teaching somewhere near the sea of Galilee. Less than a hundred miles to the south the River Jordan flows into another sea, the Salt Sea, so salty that it is dead. And on its western side there lived at that time a Dead Sea Community, whose library of scrolls caused such a sensation when it was accidentally discovered some years ago. They were a monastic community of Essenes who had withdrawn from the wicked world. They called themselves 'the sons of light', but they took no steps to let their light shine, and in their ghetto their salt was as useless as the deposits on the shores of the nearby sea. Is it possible that Jesus was thinking of them?

What does it mean in practice to be the salt of the earth? To begin with, we who are Christians should be more courageous, more outspoken in condemning evil. Condemnation is negative, to be sure, but the action of salt is negative. Sometimes standards slip and slide in a community because there is no clear Christian protest...

And alongside this condemnation of what is false and evil, we should take our stand boldly for what is true, good, and decent whether in our neighborhood, in our place of study, profession or business, or in the wider sphere of national life, including the mass media.

Christian salt takes effect by deeds as well as words. We have already seen that God has created both the state and the family as social structures to restrain evil and encourage goodness. And Christians have a responsibility to see that these structures are not only preserved but are also operated with justice. Christians have too often interpreted their social responsibility in terms only of helping the casualties of a sick society and have done nothing to change the structures which cause the casualties. Just as doctors are concerned not only with the treatment of patients but also with preventive medicine and public health, so we should be concerned with what might be called preventive social medicine and higher standards of moral hygiene. However small our part may be, we cannot opt out of seeking to create better social structures, which guarantee justice in legislation and law enforcement, the freedom and dignity of the individual, civil rights for minorities and the abolition of social and racial discrimination. We should neither despise these things nor avoid our responsibility for them. They are part of God's purpose for his people. Whenever Christians are conscientious citizens, they are acting like salt in the community. As Sir Frederick Catherwood put it in his contribution to the symposium *Is Revolution Change?*, 'To try to improve society is not worldliness but love. To wash your hands of society is not love but worldliness.'

But fallen human beings need more than barricades to stop them becoming as bad as they could be. They need regeneration, new life through the gospel. This is what lies behind our second vocation to be 'the light of the world'. For the truth of the gospel is the light, contained indeed in fragile earthenware lamps, yet shining through our very earthiness with the more conspicuous brightness. We are called both to spread the gospel and to frame our manner of life in a way that is worthy of the gospel.

So then, we should never pit our two vocations to be salt and light, our Christian social and evangelistic responsibilities, over against each other as if we had to choose between them. We should not exaggerate either, nor disparage either, at the expense of the other. Neither can be a substitute for the other. The world needs both. It is bad and needs salt; it is dark and needs light. Our Christian vocation is to be both. Jesus Christ said so, and that should be enough. We must not be shy of our vocation to be salt as well as light, or we shall be guilty of separating what Jesus has united.

Conclusion

A Christian's character as described in the Beatitudes and a Christian's influence as defined in the salt and light metaphors are organically related to one another. Our influence depends on our character. But the Beatitudes set an extremely high and exacting standard. It may be helpful, therefore, to look back over both paragraphs and note the incentives to righteousness which Jesus gives.

First, this is the way we ourselves will be blessed. The Beatitudes identify those whom God declares to be 'blessed', those who please him and who themselves find fulfilment. True blessedness is found in goodness, and nowhere else.

Second, this is the way the world will best be served. Jesus offers his followers the immense privileges of being the world's salt and light if only they will live by the Beatitudes.

Third, this is the way God will be glorified. Here towards the beginning of his ministry Jesus tells his disciples that if they let their light shine so that their good works are seen, their Father in heaven will be glorified. At the end of his ministry, in the upper room, he will express the same truth in similar words: 'This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.'

This, then, is the great desirability of the good and Christlike life, and so of the Christian counter-culture. It brings blessing to ourselves, salvation to others and ultimately glory to God.²

² John Stott, ed., *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount: Christian Counter-Culture*, Revised Edition., The Bible Speaks Today (London: IVP, 2020), 40–50.

Lesson 20 (5-19-24)

Jesus on Righteousness (Matthew 5:17-20)

¹⁷“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

- Matthew 5:17-20 ESV

This paragraph moves from a focus on the disciples to a focus on Jesus himself. Jesus talks about his relationship to the Law and the Prophets. Jesus’ affirmation of and sacred regard for the Jewish Scriptures is stated in unequivocal terms, and Jesus makes it clear that his followers should have the same regard for it, such that followers of Jesus live righteous lives that exceed the religious leaders of the day. This paragraph becomes important as a preface to the following six paragraphs, each of which deals with a command or theme in the law that Jesus will challenge and/or intensify.¹

Discussion Questions

This passage naturally divides into two parts, verses 17-18 and verses 19-20. What does each part emphasize?

Why might some people have thought that Jesus came to abolish the Law and the Prophets (v. 17)?

The Law and the Prophets (the Old Testament) consist of doctrine, prophecy, and ethical precepts. In what sense has Jesus fulfilled each of these?

How does Jesus emphasize his high view of the Old Testament Scripture (vv. 17-18)?

How can Jesus’ words strengthen our confidence in Scripture?

¹ Douglas Mangum, ed., *Lexham Context Commentary: New Testament*, Lexham Context Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), Mt 5:17–20.

What portions of the Bible have you tended to skip over or neglect? How can you make studying these a higher priority?

How will our response to the Law determine our status in the kingdom of heaven (v. 19)?

The Pharisees and teachers of the law were zealous about serving the Law. How can our righteousness possibly surpass theirs (v. 20)?

How do you distinguish between the parts of the Old Testament we should still obey and the parts no longer binding on us? For example, what is the difference between the Ten Commandments and the laws regarding what animals to bring for a sacrifice to the Lord?

Was there anything from last week's sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from *R. Kent Hughes, The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 91–97.*]

The structure of the Sermon on the Mount is remarkably beautiful. It begins in Matthew 5:1–12 with the Beatitudes, which give us a penetrating description of the inner character or righteousness of those who are members of the kingdom of heaven. Next, in verses 13–16 the Lord gives two brilliant metaphors—salt and light—indelibly impressing upon us the effects of such inner righteousness upon humanity. Then in verses 17–20 Jesus gives a summary description of the radical righteousness of the kingdom, also introducing six great examples of how this righteousness is in continuity with the Old Testament Law. Each example is introduced with a variation of Christ's formula, "You have heard that it was said ... but I tell you" (see vv. 21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43).

I think it is significant that these three sections of the sermon are increasingly personal. In the Beatitudes Christ speaks in the third person: "Blessed are the" But in the final Beatitude and in the metaphors, he switches to the second person: "Blessed are you ... you are the salt ... you are the light." Then in the applications that follow, he switches to the first person: "But I tell you...." No scribe or rabbi had ever spoken like this. They typically spoke in the second or third person. "Rabbi Abin said in the name of Rabbi Elai in Rabbi Jochanan's name ..." Jesus' radical style of address concerning radical righteousness was, "I tell you." This was radically personal and authoritative.

In verses 17–20 we will see Jesus’ highly personal statement of the radical righteousness of the Sermon on the Mount as it relates to the Old Testament Law. Verses 17, 18 tell us of the radical righteousness of Christ and the Law, verses 19, 20 of the radical righteousness of Christians and the Law. We will consider the radicalness of our call—a call to strive for radical righteousness in a dark and decaying world.

and the Law (vv. 17, 18)

After presenting the radical Beatitudes and the two metaphors, Jesus evidently sensed that some of his listeners thought he was advocating an overthrow of the Old Testament Law. So he gave his unforgettable disclaimer, which set down for all time his relationship to the Law.

¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. (vv. 17, 18)

It seems clear enough from Jesus’ opening words that he came to fulfill the Law, not to annul it. However, some have actually taught that Christ came to destroy the Law. For example, the second-century heretic Marcion rewrote the New Testament by eliminating its Old Testament references and simply removed this passage. And some of his disciples even went further by exchanging the verbs in the sentence so it would read, “I have come not to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, but to abolish them!” Two centuries later Dr. Faustus, a leader of the Manichees who also repudiated the Old Testament and its God, attacked Augustine. Augustine’s *Reply to Faustus* became the classic answer to such thinking. In a nutshell, the answer was this: Jesus was not abolishing the Law when he countered the Pharisees saying, “You have heard it said ... but I tell you.” Rather, he was correcting the perversions that the scribes and Pharisees had made of the Law.

This understanding remained standard among the church fathers and through the Dark Ages. The Reformation leaders said exactly the same thing. Luther repeatedly returned to his statement that the true interpretation of the Law had been obscured by the rabbis. Calvin argued the same, saying of Christ’s corrections, “He only restored it [the Law] to its integrity by maintaining and purifying it when obscured by the falsehood, and defiled by the leaven of the Pharisees.” Today Carl Henry agrees, saying, “What He [Christ] criticizes is not the law itself but contemporary formulations of the law.”⁴ Moreover, the fact that Christ brought an end to the ceremonial laws, such as the sacrifices and dietary restrictions, does not amount to abolishing the Law but rather fulfills it.

In reality, Christ established the Law and the Prophets. How did he do this? First and foremost, he fulfilled their messianic predictions. Both the Prophets and the Law pointed to Jesus. Here the terms “the Law” and “the Prophets” are taken together to signify the entire Old Testament. Jesus himself said, “For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John” (Matthew 11:13). Thus the entire Old Testament had a prophetic function that was fulfilled in Christ. Some of it was clearly predictive—for example, the predictions of Jesus’ place of birth (Micah 5:2) and the

crucifixion (Psalm 22, esp. v. 16). Other parts were not so clear, such as his call from Egypt (see Matthew 2:15 and Hosea 11:1). But whether obvious or hidden, Jesus fulfilled all the messianic predictions of the Old Testament. This was his principal fulfillment.

However, he also fulfilled the Old Testament in other ways. He fulfilled the Law by dying on the cross and satisfying the demands of the Law against those who would believe on him. The entire sacrificial system in Old Testament times pointed to him. In his experiments Ivan Pavlov would ring a bell whenever he fed his dogs. Eventually the dogs would salivate whenever they heard the bell. They knew the bell meant food for them. The sacrifices of the Old Testament prepared the people by instilling in them the conditioned reflex that sacrifice meant death. And the Old Testament sacrifices prepared them for the Lord Jesus' death when he came to die for our sins. Jesus fulfilled what the sacrificial system had pointed to.

A third area of fulfillment of the Old Testament Law and Prophets is that Jesus perfectly kept all its commands. He was "born under law" (Galatians 4:4) "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). He kept the Law perfectly, never falling short in even one point.

A fourth way of fulfillment is that Jesus fulfills the Law in believers by means of the Holy Spirit. That is the argument of Romans 8:2–4: *Through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.*

We are able to fulfill the righteousness of the Law by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is what Ezekiel prophesied: *I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. (11:19, 20)*

A fifth way that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament Scriptures is that he brought the great doctrines of the Old Testament to fruition by his teaching and person. Bishop Ryle put it this way: The Old Testament is the Gospel in the bud; the New Testament is the Gospel in full flavor. The Old Testament is the Gospel in the blade; the New Testament is the Gospel in full ear.

The only possible conclusion is that Jesus fulfilled the Law and the Prophets in a multifaceted, dynamic way and in no way destroyed the Law but rather completely superseded and fulfilled it. His claim is the most stupendous ever made. We stand in awe at the matchlessness of Christ! He is the Author of the Law, and he is its Fulfiler. Nothing compares with the superb and mysterious authority with which he puts forth the truth.

Notice too the perpetuity of the Law: *"I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."* (v. 18)

Jesus' language is compelling. "The smallest letter" is the Hebrew yod, which looks something like an apostrophe. There are approximately 66,420 yods in the Old Testament. "The least stroke" is the Hebrew serif, a tiny extension on some letters that distinguishes them from similar letters. Not one of the 66,000-plus yods or innumerable little serifs will pass from the Law (which here includes the Law and the Prophets) until "everything is accomplished." Our Lord is here teaching the inspiration and immutability of the Old Testament. He is not only saying that the Old Testament contains the truth or that it becomes the truth, but that "the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). Holy Scripture and its teaching will not change. Time and time again when our Lord quotes the Old Testament, he used the perfect tense, *gegriptai*—"It is written"—which means "it was written, it is written, and it always will be written." The Scriptures are more enduring than the universe. Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" (Matthew 24:35).

So, the radically righteous Christ saw the Old Testament Prophets and Law as God's perfect, enduring Word and, furthermore, saw his life as the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. We must see the profound continuity between Christ's righteousness and the righteousness called for by the Old Testament. The radical righteousness Christ lived and taught, including here in the Sermon on the Mount, is not out of line with the Old Testament. Christ's righteousness is radical not because it is new but because he lived it! The Old Testament is still tremendously important, even though we are under grace. The Law instructs us in the righteous demands of God. Through it we see how high his holiness and his standards are, and we see how far short we fall and thus desperately need God's grace...

There is a beautiful parallel between Martin Luther and John Wesley, who also was slain by the Law. He saw the requirements of God and tried to meet them, but he failed. But coming to the end of himself, he too believed and lived a powerful Christian life. We need to be people of both Testaments! Relying on the New Testament alone makes us one-legged believers. We need to spend time in the Old Testament and in the New. That is one of the practical implications of Christ's attitude toward the Law and the Prophets.

and the Law (vv. 19, 20)

Verses 19, 20 give us specific advice as to how we should relate to the Old Testament.

¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (v. 19)

Notice the word "great." We twentieth-century Americans like that word, though we are not careful about its use...Our use of the word *great* is not too great or meaningful. But when God says certain people will be called "great"—*megas*—big in the kingdom—he means it! In fact, we can only guess what this means, and our guesses will almost certainly fall short!

How does one become “great” in heaven? By keeping God’s commandments and teaching them to others. Believers who by the power of the indwelling Spirit (Romans 8:1–14) fulfill the Law will be the big ones in heaven! On the other hand, the one who “breaks one of the least of these commandments and so teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.” Such a person will still be there, but that is all.

The keeping of the precepts of God as recorded in the Old Testament will make a difference in our eternal reward. Following Christ is not simply following subjective inner impulses. It involves knowing what *he* desires. We need to be in touch with the teaching of all of God’s Word as to the nature of righteousness. We need the Holy Spirit. Jesus’ words have set us up for a supremely radical call. True belief necessitates radical personal righteousness.

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

To the average man on the street, the Jews of Jesus’ day, this was absolutely shocking! The scribes and Pharisees made obedience to God’s Law the master passion of their lives. They calculated that the Law contained 248 commandments and 365 prohibitions, and they tried to keep them *all*. How could anyone surpass that? And how could such righteousness be made a condition to entering the kingdom? Jesus seemed to be saying, “Don’t think I have come to make things easier by reducing the demands of the Law. Far from it! In fact, if your righteousness does not exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, you’ll never make it!”

What a dilemma! What is the solution? Part of the answer is that the Pharisees’ righteousness was not so great. It was merely external. It focused on the ceremonial. Its man-made rules actually were unconscious attempts to reduce the demands of the Law and make it manageable. Those rules insulated them from the Law’s piercing heart demands. These men were also self-satisfied. A Pharisee could stand on a corner, look at a publican, and say, “I thank God I am not like that man.” Jesus was demanding a deeper obedience. The Pharisees saw obedience quantitatively (obedience to myriad little laws), but Jesus saw it qualitatively. The righteousness that Christ demands is supremely radical. It is immeasurably higher than the rabbis’ concept of righteousness. Jesus closes this whole section by saying, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (v. 48).

Christ’s intransigence, his hard unbending words, were actually full of grace. When he said, “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven,” he was speaking as kindly as he ever spoke, for he was explaining in the most dramatic terms the impossibility of salvation apart from his grace. This takes us right back to ground zero of the first Beatitude: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God” (5:3). “Blessed are those who are spiritually bankrupt, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” “Blessed are those who realize they cannot make it on their own, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Do you understand and acknowledge that there is no way but that of grace? If so, then also see that Jesus' words in verse 17 are our hope: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." This is our hope because Christ did what we could never do—he fulfilled the Law. His righteousness exceeded that of the scribes and Pharisees. And because he fulfilled the Law, he can give us a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. He fulfilled the Law by leading a perfectly righteous life. He fulfilled its demands against us by dying for us.

Conclusion

The idea that our righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees requires some clarification. We tend to think that it is a simple matter to exceed the scribes and Pharisees, since they were misdirected and hypocritical. But Jesus' initial audience considered scribes to be the most accurate interpreters of scripture and Pharisees to be the most devout practitioners of scripture. Today, Jesus might say, "Unless your righteousness is greater than that of pastors, missionaries, and seminary professors ..."

As the sermon progresses, we realize that Jesus did not expect his disciples to surpass the scribes and Pharisees at their own game; rather, he redefined righteousness. The scribes and Pharisees sought to codify righteousness, prescribing proper behavior in minute detail for every foreseeable situation. For example, they specified proper Sabbath rest by setting precise limits on work. They codified how far one might walk (one thousand yards), how much one might write (one word), and how much food one could take out of storage (one gulp) without breaking the Sabbath.

Jesus protested this view of righteousness, which was legalistic...Jesus' disciples cannot exceed the scribes and Pharisees in achieving such forms of "righteousness," and they must not attempt to do so. Jesus refused to offer minute prescriptions of behavior that make righteousness a relationship to the law, rather than to God. He knew that no moral net is fine enough to catch every moral question that swims. Therefore, he addressed the heart and mind, the motives of obedience.

Jesus demands much of his disciples, but his demands are not essentially legal. They specify goals and attitudes more than particular deeds for particular situations. No law is comprehensive enough to cordon off all sin; regulations cannot control the sinful heart. Jesus' instructions are far too brief to form a legal code. Rather, they illustrate the ways of an obedient heart. We surpass the scribes and Pharisees by having a heart for God.

This true righteousness shows itself when disciples do the right things for the right reasons... Since motivation is as vital as external obedience, the actual instructions in Matthew 5–7 are quite brief, compared to the volumes of Jewish religious commentary on the law. Jesus does not propound exhaustive specifications of moral behavior. He illustrates the thoughts and deeds that characterize a disciple. Ideally, these disciples find a perfect harmony between

behavior and thought. Too many people perform good deeds from craven fear, resentful duty, or selfish calculation. Jesus wants his disciples to obey from the heart.²

² Daniel M. Doriani, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Character of a Disciple* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 50–51.

Lesson 21 (6-2-24)

Christian Righteousness: Avoiding Anger and Lust (Matthew 5:21-30)

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. ²⁶ Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

- Matthew 5:21-30 ESV

These next sections of the Sermon on the Mount demonstrate that Jesus’ interpretation of the Old Testament is the antithesis of the religious leaders’ faulty interpretations (vv. 21–48). Murder with premeditation and deliberateness applies to suicide, accessory to murder, and those bearing the responsibility to punish murderers but fail to do it. Name-calling was very offensive in Jewish culture because a person’s identity was stripped away and substituted with an offensive identity. Unreconciled anger allows sin to destroy relationships, so reconciliation with one’s accuser is the correct response. Fulfilling the law’s command “Do not murder” is not accomplished simply by avoiding homicide. Jesus reveals that the intent of the law is to nurture relationships. Jesus’ disciples must have a daily urgency about maintaining healthy relationships, both with other disciples and with non-disciples. Anything that strips away the personal distinctiveness of a brother or sister is sin, and disciples must take on the responsibility to become reconciled.

Adultery was considered a serious offense because it broke the marriage relationship, a relationship that reflects the covenant relationship between God and his people. Oneness means that a man and woman give themselves to each other exclusively. So when a person even looks with desire at another, they have rejected their spouse and given themselves to another. The “right” side (such as the right hand) often stood for the more powerful or important element. The eye is the medium through which temptation first comes to stimulate

lust, and the hand represents the instrument by which lust is physically committed. Jesus deliberately exaggerates to emphasize the importance of single-hearted devotion.¹

Discussion Questions

Far from abolishing the law, what did Jesus do here in this text?

What standard does Jesus use for determining right and wrong?

In verses 21-22, Jesus places murder and unrighteous anger in the same category. How are they related?

According to Jesus' words in verses 23-26, reconciliation comes prior even to worship. As his alternative to anger and violence, Jesus offers two remarkably specific and practical commands. Be reconciled; make friends. How simple that is, and yet how hugely difficult and costly! What are some possible costs of being reconciled and making friends with an enemy?

When have you either initiated forgiveness or had someone initiate it with you? What was the outcome?

What, according to Jesus, is the full meaning of the seventh commandment: "You shall not commit adultery" (vv. 27-28)?

Should Christians take verses 29-30 literally? Explain.

What might you need to do now in light of what Jesus says here? Will you?

Was there anything from last week's sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

¹ David Gundersen, "Psalm," in *The NIV Grace and Truth Study Bible*, ed. R. Albert Mohler Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 1296–1297.

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from *John Stott, ed., The Message of the Sermon on the Mount: Christian Counter-Culture, Revised Edition., The Bible Speaks Today* (London: IVP, 2020), 63–71.]

The first two illustrations which Jesus gave of his theme (namely that he was deepening, not destroying, the demands of the law) relate to the sixth and seventh of the Ten Commandments, the prohibitions against murder and adultery.

1. Avoiding _____ (5:21–26)

The scribes and Pharisees were evidently seeking to restrict the application of the sixth commandment to the deed of murder alone, to the act of spilling human blood in homicide. If they refrained from this, they considered that they had kept the commandment. And this apparently is what the rabbis taught the people. But Jesus disagreed with them. The true application of the prohibition was much wider, he maintained. It included thoughts and words as well as deeds, anger and insult as well as murder.

Anger is mentioned at the beginning of verse 22: *anyone who is angry with a brother or sister*. Some versions add the words *without cause* which occur in most Greek manuscripts but not in the best. They are probably a later gloss and are therefore omitted in modern revisions and translations. Nevertheless, there is every reason to believe that they correctly interpret what Jesus must have meant. Not all anger is evil, as is evident from the wrath of God, which is always holy and pure. And even fallen human beings may sometimes feel righteous anger, although, being fallen, we should ensure that even this is slow to rise and quick to die down. Luther certainly knew in his own experience the meaning of righteous anger. He called it ‘an anger of love, one that wishes no one any evil, one that is friendly to the person but hostile to the sin’. The reference of Jesus, then, is to unrighteous anger, the anger of pride, vanity, hatred, malice, and revenge.

Insults are mentioned at the end of verse 22. Jesus warns us against calling our brother or sister either *Raca* (probably equivalent to an Aramaic word meaning ‘empty’) or *mōre* (the Greek word for a ‘fool’). It appears that ‘Raca’ is an insult to a person’s intelligence, calling him or her ‘emptyheaded’. A ‘moron’ also is a fool, but it can hardly be used here in its ordinary sense, for Jesus himself called the Pharisees and his disciples ‘fools’ and the apostles on occasions blamed their readers for their folly. So, we need to remember that the word had acquired both religious and moral overtones, being applied in the Old Testament to those who denied God’s existence and as a result plunged into reckless evildoing. Alternatively, as some scholars suggest, *mōre* may transliterate a Hebrew word which means a ‘rebel’, an ‘apostate’ or an ‘outcast’. In this case, Tasker suggests this: ‘The man who tells his brother that he is doomed to hell is in danger of hell himself.’⁹

Some uncertainty remains about the precise meaning of these two terms of abuse. A. B. Bruce probably preserves the major difference between the words when he writes: ‘*Raca* expresses

contempt for a man's head = you stupid!; *mōre* expresses contempt for his heart and character = you scoundrel!

Now these things—angry thoughts and insulting words—may never lead to the ultimate act of murder. Yet they are tantamount to murder in God's sight. As John was later to write: 'Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer.' Anger and insult are ugly symptoms of a desire to get rid of somebody who stands in our way. Our thoughts, looks and words all indicate that, as we sometimes dare to say, we 'wish he were dead'. Such an evil wish is a breach of the sixth commandment. And it renders the guilty person liable to the very penalties to which murderers expose themselves, not in each case literally in a human law court (for no court can charge a person with anger) but before the bar of God.

The exact meaning of the different judgments has been much discussed, but at least it is clear that Jesus was issuing a solemn warning of divine judgment. The rabbis may have been teaching not just that the only breach of the sixth commandment was murder, but also that the only penalty for murder was a human sentence: *who murders will be subject to judgment* (21). So Jesus added that *anyone who is angry without cause will equally be subject to judgment*. Although the same Greek words are used for *judgment* in verse 22 as in verse 21, now the reference must be to the judgment of God since no human court is competent to try a case of inward anger. Similarly, Jesus continued, insult will expose us not only to *the court* but even to *the fire of hell* (22). In both cases Jesus was extending the nature of the penalty as well as of the crime. Not only are anger and insult equivalent to murder, he said, but the punishment to which they lead is nothing less than the divine judgment of hell.

Therefore, if ..., Jesus continued (23), and proceeded to give a practical application of the principles he had just explained. His theme was that if anger and insult are so serious and so dangerous, then we must avoid them like the plague and take action as speedily as possible. He offered two illustrations, the first taken from going to the temple to offer sacrifice to God (23–24), and the second from going to court to answer the charges of an accuser (25–26). Jesus expressed them in the cultural terms of his own day, in which the temple still stood, and its sacrifices were still being offered. Perhaps it would be helpful to translate his illustrations into slightly more modern dress.

'If you are in church, in the middle of a service of worship, and you suddenly remember that someone has a grievance against you, leave church at once and put it right. Do not wait till the service has ended. Seek out the one you have wronged and ask for forgiveness. First go, then come. First go and be reconciled, then come and offer your worship to God.'

Again, 'If you have an unpaid debt, and your creditor takes you to court to get the money back, come to terms quickly. Make a settlement out of court. Even while you are on your way to court, pay your debt. Otherwise, once you reach the court, it will be too late. Your accuser will sue you before the judge and the judge will hand you over to the police, and you will find yourself in prison. You will never get out till you've paid the last penny. So, payment *before* prison would be much more sensible.'

The pictures are different: one is taken from church, the other from the law court. One concerns a *brother or sister* (23) and the other an enemy (25). But in both cases the basic situation is the same (somebody has a grievance against us) and the basic lesson is the same (the necessity of immediate, urgent action). In the very act of worship, if we remember the grievance, we are to break off our worship and go and put it right. In the very act of going to court, on our way there, we are to settle our debt.

Yet how rarely do we heed Christ's call to take immediate action! If murder is a horrible crime, malicious anger and insult are horrible too. And so is every deed, word, look or thought by which we hurt or offend another human being. We need to be more sensitive about these evils. We must never allow an estrangement to remain, still less to grow. We must not delay to put it right. We must not even allow the sun to set on our anger. But *immediately*, as soon as we are conscious of a broken relationship, we must take the initiative to mend it, to apologize for the grievance we have caused, to pay the debt we have left unpaid, to make amends. And these extremely practical instructions Jesus drew out from the sixth commandment as its logical implications! If we want to avoid committing murder in God's sight, we must take every possible positive step to live in peace and love with all.

2. Avoiding _____ (5:27–30)

Jesus now turns from the sixth commandment to the seventh, from the prohibition against murder to the prohibition against adultery.

Once again, the rabbis were attempting to limit the scope of the commandment *You shall not commit adultery*. Although the sin of desiring another man's wife is included in the tenth commandment against covetousness, they evidently found it more comfortable to ignore this. In their view they and their pupils kept the seventh commandment, provided that they avoided the act of adultery itself. They thus gave a conveniently narrow definition of sexual sin and a conveniently broad definition of sexual purity.

But Jesus taught differently. He extended the implications of the divine prohibition. He affirmed that the true meaning of God's command was much wider than a mere prohibition of acts of sexual immorality. As the prohibition of murder included the angry thought and the insulting word, so the prohibition of adultery included the lustful look and imagination. We can commit murder with our *words*; we can commit adultery in our *hearts* or minds. Indeed (28), *anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart*.

Perhaps two points should be made before we go any further. There is not the slightest suggestion here that natural sexual relations within the commitment of marriage are anything but God-given and beautiful. We may thank God that the Song of Solomon is contained in the Bible, for there is no Victorian prudery there but rather the uninhibited delight of lovers, of bride and bridegroom, in each other. No. The teaching of Jesus here refers to unlawful sex outside marriage, whether practiced by married or unmarried people. He is not even forbidding

us to look at a woman, but to look lustfully. We all know the difference between looking and lusting.

This leads to the second point, that Jesus' allusion is to all forms of immorality. To argue that the reference is only to a man lusting after a woman and not vice versa, or only to a married man and not an unmarried, since the offender is said to commit 'adultery' not 'fornication', is to be guilty of the very casuistry which Jesus was condemning in the Pharisees. His emphasis is that any and every sexual practice which is immoral in deed is immoral also in look and in thought.

What is particularly important to grasp is his equation of looking lustfully at a woman and committing adultery with her in the heart. It is the relation between the eyes and the heart which leads Jesus in the next two verses to give some very practical instruction about how to maintain sexual purity. The argument is this: If to look lustfully is to commit adultery in the heart, in other words, if heart-adultery is the result of eye-adultery (the eyes of the heart being stimulated by the eyes of the flesh), then the only way to deal with the problem is at its beginning, which is our eyes. Righteous Job claimed that he had learned this. 'I made a covenant with my eyes', he said, 'not to look lustfully at a young woman.' Then he went on to speak of his heart: 'if my heart has been led by my eyes ... If my heart has been enticed by a woman', he would acknowledge that he had sinned and that he deserved the judgment of God. But Job had not done these things. The control of his heart was due to the control of his eyes.

This teaching of Jesus, confirmed in the experience of Job, is still true today. Deeds of shame are preceded by fantasies of shame, and the inflaming of the imagination by the indiscipline of the eyes. Our vivid imagination (one of many faculties which distinguish humans from animals) is a precious gift of God. None of the world's art and little of humanity's noblest achievements would have been possible without it. Imagination enriches the quality of life. But all God's gifts need to be used responsibly; they can all too easily be degraded and abused. This is certainly true of our imagination. I doubt if human beings have ever fallen victim to immorality who have not first opened the sluice gates of passion through their eyes. Similarly, whenever men and women have learned sexual self-control in deed, it is because they have first learned it in the eyes of both flesh and fantasy.

This brings us to verses 29 and 30: *If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away ... And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away.* This was evidently a favorite saying of Jesus, for he quoted it more than once. It recurs later in this same Gospel, where the foot is added to the eye and the hand, and the reference is a general one to 'temptations to sin', not explicitly to sexual temptation. So, the principle has a wider application. Even so, this is the particular realm that Jesus applied it to in the Sermon on the Mount. What did he mean by it?

On the surface it is a startling command to gouge out an offending eye, to cut off an offending hand or foot. A few Christians, whose zeal greatly exceeded their wisdom, have taken Jesus *literally* and mutilated themselves. Perhaps the best-known example is the third-century

scholar Origen of Alexandria. He went to extremes of asceticism, renouncing possessions, food and even sleep, and in an over-literal interpretation of this passage and of Matthew 19:12 actually castrated himself. Not long after, in AD 325, the Council of Nicea was right to forbid this barbarous practice.

The command to get rid of troublesome eyes, hands and feet is an example of our Lord's use of dramatic figures of speech. What he was advocating was not a literal physical self-maiming, but a ruthless moral self-denial. Not mutilation but mortification is the path of holiness he taught, and 'mortification' or 'taking up the cross' to follow Christ means to reject sinful practices so resolutely that we die to them or put them to death.

What does this involve in practice? Let me elaborate and so interpret Jesus' teaching: 'If your eye causes you to stumble because temptation comes to you through your eyes (objects you see), then pluck out your eyes. That is, don't look! Behave as if you had actually plucked out your eyes and flung them away and were now blind and so *could* not see the objects which previously caused you to stumble. Again, if your hand or foot causes you to stumble, because temptation comes to you through your hands (things you do) or your feet (places you visit), then cut them off. That is, don't do it! Don't go! Behave as if you had actually cut off your hands and feet, and had flung them away, and were now crippled and so *could* not do the things or visit the places which previously caused you to stumble.' That is the meaning of 'mortification'.

We might wonder if there has ever been a generation in which this teaching of Jesus were more needed or more obviously applicable than our own, in which the river of filth (of pornographic material) is so accessible. Pornography is offensive to Christians (and indeed to all healthy minded people) first and foremost because it degrades people from human beings into sex objects, but also because it presents the eye of the beholder with unnatural sexual stimulation. If we have a problem of sexual self-mastery, and if nonetheless our eyes feast on the images offered to us, we are not only sinning but actually inviting disaster.

I am very far from wishing to lay down any rules about this. For we have to recognize that all men and women are made differently. Sexual desire is more easily aroused in some than in others, and different things arouse it. Sexual self-discipline and self-control come more naturally to some than to others. Some can see explicitly sexual imagery and remain entirely unscathed, while others would find them terribly corrupting. Our temperaments and therefore our temptations vary. So, we have no right to stand in judgment on others regarding what they feel able to permit themselves.

What we are free to say is only this (for this is what Jesus said): *if* your eye causes you to stumble, don't look; *if* your foot causes you to stumble, don't go; and *if* your hand causes you to stumble, don't do it. The rule Jesus laid down was hypothetical, not universal. He did not require all his disciples (metaphorically speaking) to blind or maim themselves, but only those whose eyes, hands and feet were a cause of sinning. It is they who have to take action; others may be able to retain both eyes, both hands and both feet without fear. Of course, even they

may need to refrain from exercising certain freedoms out of loving concern for those with weaker consciences or weaker wills, but that is another principle which is not set out here.

What is necessary for all those with strong sexual temptations, and indeed for all of us in principle, is discipline in guarding the approaches of sin. The posting of sentries is a commonplace of *military* tactics; *moral* sentry-duty is equally indispensable. Are we so foolish as to allow the enemy to overwhelm us, simply because we have posted no sentries to warn us of his approach?

To obey this command of Jesus will involve for many of us a certain 'maiming'. We shall have to eliminate from our lives certain things which (though some may be innocent in themselves) either are, or could easily become, sources of temptation. In his own metaphorical language, we may find ourselves without eyes, hands, or feet. That is, we shall deliberately decline to read certain literature, see certain films, visit certain exhibitions. If we do this, we shall be regarded by some of our contemporaries as narrow-minded, untaught Philistines. 'What?' they will say to us incredulously, 'you've not read such and such a book? You've not seen such and such a film? Why, you're not educated!' They may be right. We may have had to become culturally 'maimed' in order to preserve our purity of mind. The only question is whether, for the sake of this gain, we are willing to bear that loss and endure that ridicule.

Jesus was quite clear about it. It is better to lose one member and enter life maimed, he said, than to retain our whole body and go to hell. That is to say, it is better to forgo some experiences this life offers in order to enter the life which is life indeed; it is better to accept some cultural amputation in this world than risk final destruction in the next. Of course, this teaching runs clean counter to modern standards of broadmindedness. It is based on the principle that eternity is more important than time and purity than culture, and that any sacrifice is worthwhile in this life if it is necessary to ensure our entry into the next. We have to decide, quite simply, whether to live for this world or the next, whether to follow the crowd or Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

If God is speaking to you about some things that need to be put out of your life, do what he says today. If God is telling you to change your visual habits, then do it for your soul's sake and that of your family. If God is saying that a relationship must end, then do it today. Or perhaps there is some pleasure that is okay for others but is causing you to stumble, and you know it must go. If so, get rid of it right now. You cannot do it through your own willpower. Obey God with humility and prayer. Ask him for strength, and then do what he says.²

² R. Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 111.

Lesson 22 (6-9-24)

Divorce and Remarriage (Matthew 5:31-32)

³¹“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³²But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.
- Matthew 5:31-32 (ESV)

This is the third of six paragraphs in which Jesus challenges and/or intensifies certain aspects of the law, placing himself as the authoritative interpreter of the law. This series of teachings is often called the antitheses, as they begin with the pattern of “you heard it was said ... but I say to you ...” The paragraph begins with a quotation from the law about divorce and then proceeds to challenge the casualness with which divorce is approached.

5:31 Jesus begins his teaching on divorce with the first part of the antithesis formula that characterizes this group of six paragraphs. He quotes Deut. 24:1, which indicates that a man who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.

5:32 Jesus now gives the next part of the antithesis formula. This is an emphatic statement on Jesus’ part, signaled by placing the pronoun at the front of the clause. The previous two antitheses juxtaposed God’s word in the Decalogue with Jesus. Here in this paragraph, Jesus now juxtaposes his words with those of Moses. Jesus strengthens the marriage bond, indicating only a single reason for divorce to occur. Jesus also indicates that the result of an illegitimate divorce is that the two divorcees will now commit adultery.¹

Discussion Questions

Four basic interpretations of the biblical data on divorce and remarriage are possible. What are they?

If you were tasked to write an article entitled, “Top Ten Reasons Marriages Fail,” what reasons would you include?

What does the Old Testament teach about divorce?

What does Malachi 2:13–16 reveal about God’s feelings about divorce?

¹ Douglas Mangum, ed., *Lexham Context Commentary: New Testament*, Lexham Context Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), Mt 5:31–32.

How were the Scribes and Pharisees misusing Moses' allowance for divorce (Deut. 24:1-4)?

What did Jesus teach about divorce and remarriage? (For Further Study: Look up Matthew 19:1–12; Mark 10:1–12; Luke 16:18; John 4:1–26; 1 Corinthians 7:10–16, 39–40.)

Will Jesus ever divorce His Bride, the Church (Eph. 5:22–23)?

Divorce is rampant in our society and seemingly common in the church. How should the church respond to divorce, both in principle and in practice?

What does it take to have a strong marriage?

Was there anything from last week's sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from *John F. MacArthur Jr., Matthew, vol. 1, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 307–318.*]

The many confused and conflicting ideas in our day about the biblical teaching on divorce are not caused by any deficiency in God's revelation but by the fact that sin has clouded men's minds to the straightforward simplicity of what God has said. When people read God's Word through the lenses of their own preconceptions or carnal dispositions, a confused and perplexing picture is the only possible outcome. The confusion is not with God but with man... From every side the family is being directly attacked or indirectly undermined... The harmful effects of divorce on children, parents, and on the family and society as a whole would be more than enough reason to be concerned about the problem. But the supreme tragedy of divorce is that it violates God's Word...

Only four basic interpretations of the biblical data on divorce and remarriage are possible, and all four are found to be held in various Christian circles. The strictest view is that divorce is not permissible under any circumstance or for any reason. The opposite position contends that both divorce and remarriage are permissible for any reason or none. The other two views lie between those extremes. One is that divorce is permitted under certain circumstances, but remarriage is never permitted. The other is that both divorce and remarriage are permitted under certain circumstances.

The Bible, of course, actually teaches only one of those four possibilities, and that view is taught by Jesus here in Matthew 5:31–32. Like many people today, the Jews of Jesus’ day, typified by the scribes and Pharisees, had developed their own standards for divorce and remarriage—which they taught as God’s standards. In this passage Jesus continues to correct the erroneous doctrines and practices of the rabbinic traditions and to replace them with the truth.

The Teaching of the _____ and _____ (5:31)

It was said continues to refer to “the ancients” mentioned in verse 21, the rabbis and scribes who had developed the commonly accepted Jewish traditions over the previous centuries—primarily during and after the Babylonian Exile. This is our Lord’s way of setting in place what is antithetical to the teaching of God.

In Jesus’ day the dominant rabbinic position on divorce, and by extension on remarriage, was the most liberal of the four views mentioned above: permissibility on any grounds. The only requirement was the giving of a **certificate of dismissal**. By that period of Jewish history divorce had become so easy and casual that a man could dismiss his wife for such trivial things as burning his meal or embarrassing him in front of his friends. Often the husband did not bother to give a reason, since none was required. The rabbinic justification for such easy divorce was based on an erroneous interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1–4, the Bible’s first mention of a **certificate of dismissal**.

The focus of that passage is not the question of whether or not divorce is permitted. It does not provide for divorce, much less command it. It is rather the statement of a very narrow, specific law that was given to deal with the matter of adultery. It shows how improper divorce leads to adultery, which results in defilement. Through Moses, God recognized and permitted divorce under certain circumstances when it was accompanied by a certificate, but He did not thereby condone or command divorce. God’s permission for divorce was but another accommodation of His grace to human sin (see Matt. 19:18). “Because of your hardness of heart,” Jesus explained to the Pharisees on another occasion, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way” (Matt. 19:8).

The certificate did not make the divorce right, but only gave the woman some protection. It protected her reputation from slander and provided proof of her legal freedom from her former husband and her consequent right to remarry.

A literal rendering of the Hebrew word translated “indecent” in Deuteronomy 24:1 is “the nakedness of a thing.”...The meaning of the word in Deuteronomy 24 includes every kind of improper, shameful, or indecent behavior unbecoming to a woman and embarrassing to her husband. It cannot refer to adultery, because death was the penalty for that, even if it occurred during the engagement period (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22–24).

What kind of indecency, then, would lead to the **certificate of dismissal**? It must have been sins of unfaithfulness and promiscuity that stopped just short of actual adultery. At any rate,

Deuteronomy 24 is clear that if the woman remarried and was divorced again, or even if her second husband died, she could not be remarried to her first husband, because she had been “defiled.”

The Lord’s primary purpose in Deuteronomy 24:1–4 was not to give an excuse for divorce but to show the potential evil of it. His intention was not to provide for it but to prevent it. Verses 1–3 are a series of conditional clauses that culminate in the prohibition of a man ever remarrying a woman he has divorced if she marries someone else and is separated from that second husband either by another divorce or by death. Because her first divorce had no sufficient grounds, her second marriage would be adulterous. Even if her second husband died, she could not go back to her first, “since she [had] been denied” (v. 4). She was defiled (more literally, “disqualified”) because of the adultery brought about by her second marriage—which is the primary point of the passage. Moses is saying, then, that the divorce for indecency or promiscuity creates an adulterous situation.

In God’s eyes, therefore, the granting of a certificate did not in itself make a divorce legitimate. Far from approving divorce, Deuteronomy 24:1–4 is a strong warning about it. The passage suggests, or perhaps assumes, that a divorce on proper grounds, accompanied by a certificate, was permitted. It does not offer a divine provision for divorce, but rather shows that divorce often leads to adultery. Even on the grounds of adultery, divorce was tolerated in the law of Moses only as a gracious alternative to the capital punishment that adultery justly deserved (Lev. 20:10–14).

The most popular school of rabbinic tradition in Jesus’ day, as reflected in the Targum of Palestine (written in the first century A.D.), interpreted Moses’ words in Deuteronomy 24:1 as a command. What God had provided as reluctant permission had been turned into a legal right.

The Teaching of the _____

The Bible’s teaching on divorce cannot be understood apart from its teaching on marriage. Immediately after woman was created, God declared, “For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). Marriage was God’s plan, not man’s, and in the deepest sense every couple that has ever been married, whether believers or not, participates in a union established by the Creator Himself. Marriage is God’s institution.

From the beginning, God intended monogamous, life-long marriage to be the only pattern of union between men and women. “Cleave to” carries the idea of firm, permanent attachment, as in gluing. In marriage a man and woman are so closely joined that they become “one flesh,” which involves spiritual as well as physical oneness. In marriage God brings a husband and wife together in a unique physical and spiritual bond that reaches to the very depths of their souls. As God designed it, marriage is to be the welding of two people together into one unit, the blending of two minds, two wills, two sets of emotions, two spirits. It is a bond the Lord intends

to be indissoluble as long as both partners are alive. The Lord created sex and procreation to be the fullest expression of that oneness, and the intimacies of marriage are not to be shared with any other human being.

One of the most immediate and damaging consequences of the Fall was the destruction of the blissful, loving, and caring relationship between husband and wife. In the garden, Adam and Eve had ruled together, with him as the head and her as his helper. Adam's headship was a loving, caring, understanding provision of leadership. Eve's role was that of loving, willing submission, and support. Both were totally devoted to the Lord and to each other.

But problems in marriage, like problems in every other area of earthly existence, began with the Fall. Man's first sin brought a separation from God, a separation of man and nature, and a separation of husband and wife. God's curse on Eve and all women after her was, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth, in pain you shall bring forth children; yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Gen. 3:16). The curse on Adam and every man after him was, "Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you" (v. 17).

The Fall distorted and perverted the marriage relationship. Henceforth the wife's "desire" for her husband would no longer be the desire to help but the desire to control—the same desire that sin had for Cain (see Gen. 4:7, where the identical Hebrew construction is used). For the man's part, his "rule" over his wife henceforth would be one of stern control, in opposition to her desire to control him. At the Fall the battle of the sexes began, and women's liberation and male chauvinism have ever since been clouding and corrupting the divine plan for marriage.

One of the most tragic consequences of that battle is the propensity to divorce. But in light of God's perfect plan for marriage—the plan followed but for a brief while in the Garden of Eden—it is clear that divorce is like a person cutting off an arm or leg because he has a splinter in it. Instead of dealing with whatever trouble arises between husband and wife, divorce tries to solve the problem by destroying the union.

On an even deeper level, divorce destroys a union that God Himself has made. That is why Jesus said unequivocally, "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate" (Matt. 19:6). The union of marriage is one which God, as its Creator, *never* desires to be broken. Divorce is a denial of His will and a destruction of His work.

The seriousness with which God takes marriage is seen in the penalty for adultery. All sexual intercourse outside of marriage is sinful and defiling, but any illicit sexual activity that involved married persons was punishable by death (Lev. 20:10–14). Two of the Ten Commandments relate to the sanctity of marriage. Not only is the act of adultery forbidden but even the intent of it in coveting another man's wife (Ex. 20:14, 17).

In fact, nowhere is God's high view of the sanctity of marriage more clearly emphasized than in the last of the Ten Commandments: "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife" (Ex. 20:17). For

a married person even to desire another partner was a grievous sin. As Jesus affirms in Matthew 5:28, adultery is forbidden to both the body and the mind. In Leviticus 18:18 God went a step further and forbade polygamy. Every violation of lifelong, faithful, monogamous marriage was forbidden by the divine law. God established marriage as the physical, spiritual, and social union of one man with one woman, a life-long, indivisible union that is never to be violated and never to be broken. He confirms His absolute hatred of divorce in Malachi 2:13–16...

The Pharisees used an erroneous interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1–4 to defend their idea of divorce, conveniently interpreting that passage as a command for divorce (Matt. 19:7). In fact, the passage neither commands nor condones divorce. It simply recognizes it as a reality, as do other Old Testament passages. In Isaiah 50:1, for example, God challenges the nation of Israel for their spiritual fornication: “Thus says the Lord, ‘Where is the certificate of divorce, by which I have sent your mother away? Or to whom of My creditors did I sell you? Behold, you were sold for your iniquities, and for your transgressions your mother was sent away.’ ”

Jeremiah 3:1 contains a similar reference: “God says, ‘If a husband divorces his wife, and she goes from him, and belongs to another man, will he still return to her? Will not that land be completely polluted? But you are a harlot with many lovers; yet you turn to Me,’ declares the Lord.”

Far from encouraging divorce, most references to divorce in the Old Testament put restrictions on it. For example, Deuteronomy says about a husband who falsely accuses his bride of “shameful deeds” that “they shall fine him a hundred shekels of silver and give it to the girl’s father, because he publicly defamed a virgin of Israel. And she shall remain his wife; he cannot divorce her all his days” (22:14, 19). In the same chapter we read: “If a man finds a girl who is a virgin, who is not engaged, and seizes her and lies with her and they are discovered, then the man who lay with her shall give to the girl’s father fifty shekels of silver, and she shall become his wife because he has violated her; he cannot divorce her all his days” (vv. 28–29).

Divorce was clearly taught to be a defilement for a priest. “They [priests] shall not take a woman who is profaned by harlotry, nor shall they take a woman divorced from her husband; for he is holy to his God.... A widow, or a divorced woman, or one who is profaned by harlotry, these he may not take; but rather he is to marry a virgin of his own people” (Lev. 21:7, 14).

In the Old Testament God does not condone or bless divorce. In one unique case (Ezra 10:3–5) God actually commanded divorce through His priest, Ezra, because the existence of His covenant people was threatened (cf. Deut. 7:1–5); but that single exception did not negate His hatred of divorce. Ezra’s call for divorce is an extreme historical example of following the lesser of two evils, and it applied only to the covenant nation of Israel in that one situation.

The entire book of Hosea is a picture of God’s forgiving and patient love for Israel, dramatized by Hosea’s forgiving and patient love for his wife, Gomer. Gomer prostituted herself, forsook Hosea, and was unfaithful to him in every possible way. But the heart of the story is that Hosea

was faithful and forgiving no matter what she did, just as God is faithful and forgiving no matter what His people do. God looks on the union of husband and wife in the same way He looks on the union of Himself with believers. And the way of God should be the way of His people—to love, forgive, draw back, and seek to restore the partner who is willing to be restored.

Although Hosea's and Gomer's marriage is primarily a symbol of God's relationship to His people Israel, it is also an apt illustration of how to deal with a wayward marriage partner. God's forgiving love seeks to hold the union together. That is certainly Christ's attitude in His relationship to the church, as He repeatedly forgives His bride and never casts her away (Eph. 5:22–23).

There must be forgiving love and restoring grace in a marriage. That alone makes marriage a proper symbol of God's forgiving love and restoring grace. That is the magnificence of marriage. To pursue divorce is to miss the whole point of God's dramatization in the story of Hosea and Gomer, the whole point of our Lord's love for His church, and thus the whole point of marriage. God hates divorce.

The Teaching of _____ (5:31-32)

Jesus affirms exactly what Moses taught in Deuteronomy 24:1–4—that unjustified divorce inevitably leads to adultery. To the legalistic, self-righteous scribes and Pharisees Jesus was saying, “You consider yourselves to be great teachers and keepers of the law, but by allowing no-fault divorce you have caused a great blight of adultery to contaminate God's people. By lowering God's standards to meet your own, you have led many people into sin and judgment.”

The Pharisees interpreted Moses' instructions to mean, “If you find something distasteful about your wife, divorce her.” They saw the paperwork as the only issue. Jesus knew their warped interpretation and thus confronted them. The error in their thinking is highlighted in 5:27–30. They prided themselves on the fact that they did not commit adultery. But Jesus said, “I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart” (v. 28). In verses 29–30 He showed them that no sacrifice is too great to maintain moral purity. Then in these present verses (31–32), He again indicts them for adultery because they were committing it by putting away their wives. The ease of divorce made it possible to avoid open adultery. Only a little paperwork was required to legalize their lust.

But Jesus confronted them with a proper interpretation of God's law. He said that every time a man without proper cause turned his wife loose to remarry, he forced her into adultery, which made him guilty also. In addition, the man who married the former wife and the woman who married the former husband were likewise guilty of adultery. The result was multiplied adultery! Jesus' whole point is that divorce leads to adultery...

By divorcing his wife on grounds other than adultery, a husband **makes** his innocent former wife **commit adultery** if she remarries—as it is assumed she would. Further, as Jesus makes explicit in Mark 10:11–12, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits

adultery against her; and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery.” Jesus’ statement that **whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery** (cf. Luke 16:18) completes the picture. A man or woman who has no right to divorce has no right to remarry. To do so initiates a whole chain of adultery, because remarriage after illegitimate divorce results in illegitimate and adulterous relationships for all parties involved.

When the detrimental effects on children, other relatives, and society in general are added, we see that few practices match divorce for destructiveness. It not only causes further sin but also confusion, resentment, hatred, bitterness, despair, conflict, and hardships of every sort.

In Matthew 19 Jesus quotes God’s declaration in Genesis 2:24 that “For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh” (Matt. 19:5). “Consequently,” He goes on to say, “they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate” (v. 6). The Pharisees’ response, “Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate and divorce her?” (v. 7) again betrayed their misinterpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1–4. Jesus had to explain, “Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way” (v. 8). God never “commanded” divorce but only “permitted” it as a concession to sinful, self-willed mankind. It is true that in Mark 10:5 Jesus speaks of Deuteronomy 24:1–4 as a commandment. But the teaching there is not a command to divorce but a command not to remarry the defiled person who has been divorced.

The condition **except for unchastity** is not a way out that God provides, but is the only grounds for divorce that He will recognize. Some say that this “exception clause” allows divorce for Jews only, and only in the case of the sin of consanguinity (marrying a near relative, a practice forbidden in Lev. 18). This view is propounded by those who wish to believe that there are no biblical grounds at all for divorce by Christians. They point out that the exception clause appears only in Matthew and maintain that to interpret it otherwise would be to contradict or add to the law governing the sin of adultery.

Of course, God has only to say a thing once for it to be true, so the fact that the exception clause appears only in Matthew has no bearing on proper interpretation. In fact, the exception clause would have been inappropriate in the contexts of Mark 10 and Luke 16. In Matthew 5 and 19 the clause is included to correct the Pharisees’ misrepresentation of God’s law regarding adultery. The exception clause in those passages amplifies Jesus’ teaching on divorce in Mark 10 and Luke 16—it does not contradict it.

Jesus gives no more approval for divorce than did Moses. The Old Testament ideal has not been changed. The permissions for divorce in the Old Testament economy were designed to meet the unique, practical problems of an imperfect, sinful people. God never condoned divorce, because what He joins together is not to be separated by man (Matt. 19:6). Adultery, another reality that God never intended, is the only thing that can break the bond of marriage.

Unchastity (*porneia*) refers to any illicit sexual intercourse, whether or not either of the parties is married. It was a broad term that included adultery, as other texts using a form of *porneia* indicate (“immorally,” 1 Cor. 10:8; “immorality,” Rev. 2:14; cf. 1 Cor. 5:1). Because Matthew 5:31–32 focuses on marriage and divorce, the primary **unchastity** involved here would be adultery. But *porneia* also included incest, prostitution, homosexuality, and bestiality—all of the sexual acts for which the Old Testament demanded the death penalty (Lev. 20:10–14). In other words, any of those corrupt and perverted sexual activities was a permissible ground for divorce.

Jesus does not advocate divorce in such cases, much less demand it. He simply says that divorce and remarriage on any other grounds always leads to adultery. As God, Jesus hates divorce (Mal. 2:16), but by implication He acknowledges that there are times when it does not result in adultery. The innocent party who has made every effort to maintain the marriage is free to remarry if his or her spouse insists on continued adultery or divorce.

Jesus sets the record straight that God still hates divorce and that His ideal is still monogamous, life-long marriage. But as a concession to sin and as a gracious provision for those who are innocent of defiling the marriage, He allows divorce on the single ground of **unchastity**.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul adds one more legitimate ground for divorce and subsequent remarriage. “But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, let him not send her away. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, let her not send her husband away” (7:12–13). After giving the reason for that instruction, he adds, “Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace” (v. 15). The Greek word translated “leave” (*chōrizō*) was often used for divorce. Thus, if an unbelieving spouse deserts or divorces a believer, the believer is no longer bound and is free to remarry.

Conclusion

So, we see that the Bible allows divorce for two reasons—marital unfaithfulness such as adultery and homosexuality, and the desertion of a believer by an unbelieving spouse.

As to the question of remarriage, the Scriptures allow it in three instances. First, if one’s mate is guilty of sexual immorality and is unwilling to repent and live faithfully with the marriage partner, divorce and remarriage are permissible. Second, when a believer is deserted by an unbelieving spouse, divorce and remarriage are again permitted. And third, as an extension of the allowance for divorce and remarriage when deserted by an unbeliever, I (Kent Hughes) personally believe that when someone has been married and divorced before coming to Christ, remarriage is allowed. Second Corinthians 5:17 says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” “New” here (*kainos*) means new in quality. “New” means what it says—really new, as contrasted to the old. The same word is used of the “new man” in Ephesians 2:15 and the “new self” in Ephesians 4:24. Not only are believers really

new, but Paul says that “the old has gone, the new has come.” A new believer is completely forgiven. I believe that among the old things that have passed away are all sins, including divorce prior to salvation. If it were otherwise, divorce would be the only sin for which Christ did not atone, and that would be inconceivable.

I hope no one misunderstands me, for divorce is not the ideal. It is a divine concession to human weakness. God hates divorce! We must realize that divorce (and remarriage) according to the Biblical guidelines is not sin—though it is due to sin. We must mourn every divorce!

We have discussed the issues primarily with the non-offending party in view. What advice is there for the offending party? Here I can do no better than quote the concluding words of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Have you nothing to say about others?* “asks someone. All I would say about them is this, and I say it carefully and advisedly, and almost in fear lest I give even a semblance of a suggestion that I am saying anything that may encourage anyone to sin. But on the basis of the gospel and in the interest of truth I am compelled to say this: Even adultery is not the unforgivable sin. It is a terrible sin, but God forbid that there should be anyone who feels that he or she has sinned himself or herself outside the love of God or outside His kingdom because of adultery. No; if you truly repent and realize the enormity of your sin and cast yourself upon the boundless love and mercy and grace of God, you can be forgiven and I assure you of pardon. But hear the words of our blessed Lord: “Go and sin no more.

Finally, what do we say to the church, to ourselves? First, we must resist the permissiveness of our culture and solidly take our stand against divorce or remarriage on any grounds other than those taught in God’s Word. Next, we must refrain from self-righteous judgmentalism. All of us are adulterers in heart. We must exercise our dealings with those who have fallen, realizing that we are ourselves under Christ’s omniscient dictum: “But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28). Finally, toward those who have fallen to or suffered divorce, we must be forgiving, like our Lord. We must not call unclean that which he has called clean (Acts 10:15). We must endeavor to share the suffering of those ravaged by divorce. And lastly, the church should make provision for the remarriage of those who have Biblically divorced.²

² R. Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 120–121.

Lesson 23 (6-16-24) To Tell the Truth (Matthew 5:33-37)

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

- Matthew 5:33-37 ESV

There is no reason to consider that solemn oaths in a court of justice, or on other proper occasions, are wrong, provided they are taken with due reverence. But all oaths taken without necessity, or in common conversation, must be sinful, as well as all those expressions which are appeals to God, though persons think thereby to evade the guilt of swearing. The worse men are, the less they are bound by oaths; the better they are, the less there is need for them. Our Lord does not enjoin the precise terms wherein we are to affirm or deny, but such a constant regard to truth as would render oaths unnecessary.¹

Discussion Questions

How might the issue of oaths and vows be connected to the topic of marriage and divorce?

The Pharisees had elaborate formulas for oaths, with some being binding and some not (see Matthew 23:16-22). What is the problem with giving oaths, according to Matthew 5:33–37?

What should we do instead? Why?

Why should oaths be unnecessary for Christians?

What sort of damage is done when Christians don’t tell the truth or when they make inflated promises?

¹ Matthew Henry and Thomas Scott, *Matthew Henry’s Concise Commentary* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), Mt 5:33.

What do God's oaths reveal?

What do our oaths reveal?

Should Christians today take oaths under any circumstances? Explain.

Was there anything from last week's sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from *Daniel M. Doriani, The Sermon on the Mount: The Character of a Disciple (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 73–84.*]

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' teaching moves from one challenging topic to the next. After addressing anger, he moves on to lust, to marriage and divorce, and now to speech, especially careless and deceptive speech. As always, his interests go through our deeds to our hearts.

The Need for Jesus' Teaching

Truthfulness is Jesus' central concern in this passage, and he knows that we struggle with veracity. "Talk is cheap," we say, for we are careless with our words—even with our promises. Politicians are renowned for breaking promises. A presidential candidate once won election, in part, on his bold promise, "Read my lips: no new taxes." Two years later, he signed a large tax increase.

Ordinary folk do the same thing. Businessmen call home and say, "It's been a busy day, but I will still be home by 6:00, 6:15 at the latest, 6:30 at the very latest. I'll call if I'm delayed." Almost half the time, we even violate the sacred promise: "I promise to take you as my lawful, wedded wife till death do us part." Clearly, we need Jesus' word about our words, from Matthew 5:33–37.

Jesus' Teaching on Oaths in Context

In Matthew 5, Jesus tells his disciples, "I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (v. 17). The scribes and Pharisees were famed for their impeccable observance of the law's external regulations, as they understood them, so the disciples must have wondered how they

could surpass them. But Jesus does not ask his disciples to surpass the Pharisees by obeying more regulations. A disciple's surpassing righteousness is not essentially a matter of legal observance. Remember, Jesus points beyond the act of murder to the problem of anger. He points beyond adultery to lust. Here he points beyond oaths to truth-telling.

Jesus does not urge us to redouble our efforts to observe the law. Nonetheless, we must let his moral teaching have its weight. If God's commands are difficult, we need to face that squarely, confess it to ourselves and to God, and ask for mercy. Many people prefer less candor. They deny that God's will is so clear. Or they redefine the law so it is easier to obey. In Jesus' day, the Pharisees tended to do that. When they faced a difficult law, they whittled it down to something manageable. We are prone to do the same sort of thing, redefining Jesus' commands to make them more manageable.

When the rabbis heard "Love your neighbor as yourself," they defined "neighbor" narrowly, so that only a small percentage of people counted as neighbors. If most people did not count as neighbors, then perhaps they could love the few that were left. When the rabbis read "You shall not commit adultery," they refrained from literal adultery, but reserved the right to divorce their wife and take another woman at any time. Thus, they removed much of the temptation to commit adultery by making it legal to divorce one woman and take another whenever they pleased. They did much the same thing with oaths and truthfulness. Jesus corrects these abuses by expounding the true meaning of the law. Therefore he argues, "You have heard that it was said ... but I tell you ..."

The _____ and _____ of Oaths (5:33)

At the most basic level, Jesus tells his disciples that they must tell the truth, but Jesus reaches that principle by discussing the matter of oaths. Oaths are a convention designed to restrain lies and false promises. We rarely use oaths or vows today. We reserve them for formal situations. We take oaths when we join the church or become an officer, when we get married, and when we are called to testify in court. While we rarely take oaths today, we use similar conventions with the same goal. We make promises to friends and family, and we sign contracts in business dealings. Oaths, promises, and contracts all have the same goal—to induce people to tell the truth and be true to their word, especially when there are temptations to lie or to break a commitment.

In biblical times, oaths and vows were more prominent. Long ago, Israel learned to guarantee their veracity by swearing, in God's presence and in his name, to tell the truth (1 Sam. 12:3; Prov. 29:24). They invoked God as witness, and they invoked him as judge if they lied. If someone swore that something was true, it had to be true. If someone vowed to perform a deed, it had to be done.

Jesus summarizes the Old Testament lesson when he says, "You have heard that it was said ... 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord' " (Matt. 5:33). Jesus understood that several Old Testament laws blessed and regulated the use of oaths and vows:

- “When a man makes a vow to the LORD ... he must not break his word” (Num. 30:2).
- “If you make a vow to the LORD your God, do not be slow to pay it” (Deut. 23:21).
- “You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God” (Lev. 19:12 ESV).

It is still God’s will that we do what we say, especially in solemn settings, when others depend on our words. Even if circumstances change, even if we get a better offer, even if faithfulness becomes difficult, even if the temptation to break a vow seems unbearable, even if keeping the vow brings real loss, even if no one but God will know if we break our vow, we should still do what we say. We should disregard a vow only if keeping it requires us to sin.

The _____ of Oaths (5:33–36)

The teaching on vows seems helpful; why then does Jesus want to amend it? First, in Jesus’ day, rabbis concocted a convoluted system that defeated the very purpose of oaths. They said that oaths might or might not be binding, depending on what one swore by. They said that if you swear *by* Jerusalem, it is not binding, but if you swear *toward* Jerusalem, it is. If you swear by the temple, it is not binding, but if you swear by the temple’s gold, it is. If you swear by the altar of sacrifice, it is not binding, but if you swear by the gift on the altar, it is.

These strange rulings perverted the purpose of oaths. Instead of calling on God to assure their honesty, they phrased their oaths so as to avoid God’s punishment when they spoke dishonestly. Perhaps no one planned to corrupt the law, but the rabbis spoiled the goal of verifying truthfulness and substituted the goal of getting away with deceitfulness.

Since the system was corrupt, since oaths no longer guaranteed anything, Jesus said, “Do not swear at all” (Matt. 5:34a). He removed the artificial distinction between vows that invoke God’s name (and so are binding) and those that do not (and so are not binding). Whatever we swear by, Jesus said, it refers to God, for he created heaven and earth. If someone swears by heaven, he invokes God, for heaven is his throne (5:34b). If someone swears by the earth, he invokes God, for it is his footstool (5:35a). If someone swears by Jerusalem, he invokes God, for it is the city of the King (5:35b). If someone swears by the hair of her head, she invokes God, for he rules our heads (5:36).

Jesus says, “Do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black” (5:36). Of course, we can change our hair color by applying certain chemicals at the salon. But we cannot change the natural color of even one hair. Whatever we swear by is related to God in some way. All oaths call God as our witness, for he created and sustains all things, even our hair and its color.

What _____ Oaths Reveal

Jesus' disciples should simply tell the truth. The Essenes said, "He who cannot be believed without [swearing by] God, is already condemned." Jesus said that we should be so true to our words that the need for oaths disappears, that a simple "Yes" or "No" is enough. The word of a disciple should be so reliable that no one asks for more.

This leads to an important question. If Jesus wants disciples to take no oaths, why does God take oaths, apparently violating his own ideal? For God does take oaths:

- He said to Abraham, "By myself I have sworn ... I will surely bless you" (Gen. 22:16–17 ESV).
- God confirmed his promises to Israel "with an oath" (Heb. 6:17).
- God swore to mankind that he would never send another flood (Gen. 9:8–11).
- He swore to send a Redeemer (Luke 1:68, 73) and to raise him from the dead (Ps. 16:10; Acts 2:27–31).
- God took oaths to guarantee his covenants (Pss. 132:11; 95:11; 119:106).

Why does God do something that he tells us not to do? John Stott replies, "Not to increase his credibility but to elicit and confirm our faith." God does not take oaths because his credibility is in doubt, but because we, having told and heard so many lies, have learned to be doubters. We are accustomed to breaking our word and having others break their word to us. Therefore, God knows that we need assurance of his reliability. He knows that our standards are so low that we expect falsehood from everyone, even him. So, for our sake he takes an oath to guarantee his word.

WHAT _____ OATHS REVEAL

If God's oaths reveal that we are accustomed to hearing lies, what do our oaths reveal? Let us answer by considering something similar—the promise. Consider why we make promises. Suppose it is Thursday evening. A father tells his children, "If you help me clean up the yard today, I will take you out for ice cream on Saturday." A wary child may reply, "Do you promise?"

The request for a promise is a testimony against us. It shows that a child has learned she cannot entirely trust her father's word. In the past, she cleaned up the yard, but never received the ice cream. When the child pointed this out, her father said, "I forgot," or "Something came up," or "You should have reminded me." So, the child learned to seek a guarantee. When she asks, "Do you promise?" she means, "Do you mean it? Can I count on you?"

The very request for a promise testifies that we are not reliable. When a child asks, "Do you promise?" he testifies that our "Yes" has not always been "Yes." Ideally, a parent's word should be so reliable that it never occurs to a child to request a guarantee. Our word should be so reliable that our "Yes" does mean "Yes" (not "Probably"), and our "No" does mean "No." Then the need for oaths and promises should wither away.

The very existence of customs such as oaths and promises reveals that human life is tainted by deception. Jesus says that the family of God should be an exception to this. In the kingdom, we should be so truthful that we need neither promises nor vows.

The Use of Oaths Today

This leads to a practical question: may disciples take oaths today? I believe we may, although a few Christians disagree. They say we must take Jesus' words literally and take no vows. To take any military or civic position, we must swear an oath of loyalty to the nation and its laws. Therefore, this position entails a willingness to forgo all public service.

Most Christians take a different approach. Following Luther and Calvin, among others, we distinguish between public and private speech. In private, among friends and brothers, we should simply tell the truth, so that the need for oaths disappears. Yet, since God himself sometimes swears oaths for the sake of his doubting listeners, we can take oaths for the sake of our doubting listeners.

Oaths are never ideal, but the law permits and regulates them (as we saw earlier) because oaths can make us think twice before we speak, thereby encouraging us to be truthful. Much of the law—both God's law and civil law—has the same goal of regulating and mitigating the effects of sin. Laws about such things as divorce, oaths, and property, not to mention the entire penal code, do not describe God's perfect will, but rein in the effects of sin.

Here then are standards for disciples. First, let us be so truthful that someone who knows us well would never solicit a vow from us. On the other hand, we may take a vow to grant assurances to someone who does not know us. God took vows to aid those who did not know how reliable he is. For the same reason, Jesus spoke under oath at his trial (Matt. 26:63–64). Paul also took vows, calling God as his witness (Rom. 1:9; 2 Cor. 1:23; 1 Thess. 2:10). Therefore, for the sake of people who do not know that we are reliable, we may take vows.

Second, for the same reason, we may take oaths and vows in the courtroom, or before entering military or political service. The alternative is that Christians would forfeit most of their influence on public life. They would also have to rethink many commercial transactions, since contracts resemble oaths.

There is a third, broader lesson. By permitting and regulating oaths, God permits us to get involved in the dirt and the mess of public life. He does not say, "Withdraw, lest your hands be touched by evil." We have already been touched by evil. Now we are the light of the world. In a "crooked and depraved generation" we "shine like stars in the universe" (Phil. 2:15). To take an oath is to get involved in the world of liars. We bring the transforming power of God to that world, but we may get a little dirty there. In the Old Testament, Joseph, Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah got involved and got dirty, but also accomplished great things.

Christians do not spend all their time in the ideal world. The disciple's goal is that his words be so reliable that people do not even think to ask, "Do you promise?" Then we will never need oaths. But when people do not know us, when the habit of lying is old and the pressure to lie is strong, we may take an oath to guarantee our word.

To the Heart of the Matter

The standards for oaths and promises are now clear enough. We know it is our duty to prove so faithful to our word that the use of oaths and promises withers away. But a problem remains. Although we know that we should keep our word, we bend or break the truth anyway. Why? Why do we make promises that we scarcely intend to keep? Is it a shallow desire to please others? Is it a device that we use to escape difficult conversations, so that when someone presses us, we finally say we will do something just to get rid of them?

Sometimes we falter through folly more than sin. We fail to keep our word because we fail to anticipate readily foreseeable obstacles to keeping it. We could have kept our word if no problems had arisen. But obstacles do arise. Thus, our failure is due to folly more than malice.

But other failures are not so innocent. Consider when we are most prone to break a promise. We violate words spoken to the powerless—such as a child—much more than we break promises spoken to the powerful—such as a boss. We break less visible commitments, such as nursery duty, and keep more highly visible ones, such as leading a meeting.

Then there is the problem of exaggeration. We heighten our sorrows to gain sympathy. We exaggerate the hours spent at work. We puff up statistics to make an impression. We may not tell many big fat lies. We rarely take a blunderbuss and blast a hole through the truth. But we do slay the truth with a thousand paper cuts. However we try, flawed humans cannot always tell the truth just as it needs to be told. It is like trying to drink coffee with a fork. It can't be done.

Conclusion

I believe that Jesus wanted us to draw the conclusion that we are unable to keep his demands. For the longer his sermon goes on, the more demanding it gets. Watch how the challenge of Jesus' teaching grows progressively more difficult:

- Matthew 5:31–32. Jesus' first word is about marriage; he tells us how to treat one who is nearest and dearest to us.
- Matthew 5:33–37. The second command deals with the truth, which we must tell our neighbors.
- Matthew 5:38–42. Third, he declares that we owe mercy, not vengeance, to someone who harms us. This may be feasible in some cases since some harm is accidental.

- Matthew 5:43–47. Finally, Jesus tells us to love our enemies, to love those who harm us by design.

Jesus' last word is harder still: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48). The standards of Jesus' sermon are too high for us. We have neither the pure heart nor the character that it demands. In this way, Jesus' teaching drives us to the gospel. We must try, and we do try, to lay aside anger and lust and falsehood. But as we try, we see that sin is like kudzu. The root is so deep. No one can kill it. We are incapable of following our Lord's standards. Therefore, we need our Lord's grace.

We need the gospel. It teaches us to ask the one who gives the standard to forgive us for breaking it. We ask the one who kept the standard in perfect righteousness to give us his righteousness and clothe us with it. And the Lord does it. He accepts us as his children and grants us the family resemblance that he requires. For the hardest command is also stated in a way that gives hope. Translated literally, Matthew 5:48 states, "You shall be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect." We rightly read the words "You shall be perfect" as a command, yet, reading it again, we notice that it hides a promise: you *shall* be perfect.

In Christ, we *are* a new creation, yet we await a wholly new creation. There is a future for the disciple, and that future draws us forward. We lean toward that future, and it both beckons us and spurs us onward. In fact, the Sermon on the Mount has many promises about the future of a disciple: We shall inherit the earth (5:5). We shall receive mercy (5:7). We shall see God (5:8). We shall be called sons of God (5:9). We shall be perfect (5:48). God is in heaven, so his moral excellence vastly exceeds our pitiful attempts at holiness. Yet he is our Father. He has come near to love us and to bring us to maturity.

So let us hear Jesus' call to truthfulness. Let us measure our words and speak carefully, so that "Yes" means "Yes." Let us describe events, without the distortions, theatrics, embellishments, and exaggerations that mislead our neighbors. Let us not claim to know what we do not know. Let us measure each promise so that we mean what we say. Our families, our churches, our society, will be stronger for it.

Yet let us also admit that, strive as we will, we will never master the tongue. The tongue is too loose, the heart is too wild. So after we hear the law of Christ, let us plead for the grace of Christ. May he forgive our sins...

Each Christian is also part of a larger family. That family is founded on perfect truth-telling. God the Father tells us the painful truth about ourselves: we are sinners, we fall short of God's holy standards, and we are unable to reform ourselves so we can meet those standards.

The Father also made a sweet promise to send a Redeemer, to deliver us from sin. He kept that promise, though it was painful to him. If God is your Father, you now belong to a family that tells the truth in love. He is building a new society, where we tell hard truths in love, so we can fix problems. We tell happy truths without adding flattery to gain a favor. As a result, we trust

each other's words. Truth-telling works, of course. But we have another reason to tell the truth: we are children of the Father, who tells us the truth about himself, about us, and about our relationship with him.

Lesson 24 (6-23-24)

Christian Righteousness: Non-retaliation and Active Love (Matthew 5:38-48)

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

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

- Matthew 5:38-48 ESV

The two final contrasts bring us to the highest point of the Sermon on the Mount, for which it is both most admired and most resented, namely the attitude of total love which Christ calls us to show towards *one who is evil* (39) and our *enemies* (44). Nowhere is the challenge of the Sermon greater. Nowhere is the distinctiveness of the Christian counter-culture more obvious. Nowhere is our need of the power of the Holy Spirit (whose first fruit is love) more compelling.¹

Discussion Questions

What do you find most difficult about Jesus’ instructions in these verses?

Jesus’ quotation of “Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth” comes from Exodus 21:24. The Pharisees evidently extended this principle from the law courts (where it belonged) to the realm of personal relationships (where it did not belong). What consequences might have resulted?

Looking at verses 39-42, how would you contrast our natural responses in such situations with the responses Jesus expects of us?

¹ John Stott, ed., *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount: Christian Counter-Culture*, Revised Edition., The Bible Speaks Today (London: IVP, 2020), 84.

What is accomplished by turning the other cheek or going a second mile?

In what situations might Christ's commands apply today?

According to Jesus, how are we to treat our enemies, and why?

Are you aware of any "enemies" toward whom you need to begin to act in love?

In what ways is Jesus' command extraordinary (vv. 46-48)?

What does Matthew 5:48 mean?

Does all this mean that Christians are to be doormats for the world to walk on? Explain.

How was Jesus himself an example of the principles "Do not resist an evil person" and "Love your enemies"?

Was there anything from last week's sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from *James Montgomery Boice, The Sermon on the Mount: An Expository Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 134–145.*]

1. _____ non-retaliation (5:38–42)

We live in a day when most people are intensely conscious of their rights. In such a climate it is not unusual for a believer in Jesus Christ to be asking, "What are my rights—as a Christian? Do I have a right to success or wealth? to a home or a family? to a good name? to be respected?" Perhaps you have asked these questions also or others like them. Do you have rights? The verses from the Sermon on the Mount to which we now come answer these questions directly, and they say—striking as it may seem—that there are *no* rights for Christians...

Matthew 5:38-42 teach that a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ has no right to retaliation, no right to things, no right to his own time, and no right to his money. In other words, he holds all

his possessions in trust from the Lord, and he is obliged to use them as Jesus did, to help others...

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “Don’t we have the right to food and drink? Don’t we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord’s brothers and Cephas? Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living?... But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.... Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible” (1 Cor. 9:4–6, 12, 19). Paul willingly gave up his natural human rights for the sake of the gospel. Although it is difficult, Jesus Christ teaches that we, his followers, are to do the same.

The Right to Retaliation

The first right that Jesus teaches us to forego is the right of retaliation. It is the first of four rights listed here, and although the list is not comprehensive (and is not intended to be) it is sufficient to indicate the type of character that God requires of us. Jesus said, “Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

This is hard teaching, of course. A tendency to insist on our own rights lies deep in the heart of man, and it is nowhere more apparent than in the natural human instinct for retaliation. We believe in fair play. So strong is our sense of it that we naturally tend to justify retaliation as “evening the score” or “giving the other man what he deserves.” C. S. Lewis found this idea so universal in the human race that he even used it as the basis of his argument for moral law and for the existence of God in the opening pages of his most popular book, *Mere Christianity*.

Jesus says that this is not the way Christians are to live. Instead of insisting on our rights we are to yield them up, particularly our imagined right to retaliation, in order that the preaching of the gospel might not be hindered. We shall be abused. We shall be persecuted often, but we are not to fight back. In fact, we are to do as Paul, who also learned this lesson, teaches: “Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord. On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:19–21).

Perhaps someone may object by saying, “That sounds good on paper, but it cannot be done—not in the kind of world we live in. Those words are meant for heaven.” Nonsense! It can be done. It is being done. What is more, if you are not doing it, you are not living the kind of special, Christ-like life that God has set before you...

Do not say that the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ cannot be followed—if you are a Christian. They can be, if Christ lives in you. What is more, they must be followed. If you are serious about them, why not begin by yielding to Christ’s words about retaliation?

Our Great Example

Before we go further, I want to deal with an objection that someone may be raising. You may be saying, “All of what you say is well and good, but isn’t it true that there are situations in which this standard need not be followed: In fact, didn’t Jesus even refuse to turn his face himself when he was struck by the high priest? Didn’t he say, ‘If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why smitest thou me?’ ”

Well, the first answer to that question is that, although Jesus said what he did, he did not turn around and punch the high priest in the nose. Even to state it that way is ludicrous, and it shows the wide gulf that exists between our reactions and the conduct of Jesus; for we would want to retaliate. That is part of the answer. The full answer, however, is that the situation here involves the law. Christ was being tried by law, and he insisted rightly that the Jewish maxims about not striking an accused person be enforced. The New Testament values law, as does the Bible from beginning to end, and none of these statements suggests that the Christian is to forego the protection that the law affords him. In fact, he is to be thankful for it, and to pray for the authorities.

On the other hand, where the law is not involved, there the Christian is to forego his rights and to refuse retaliation. In other words, his conduct is to be like that of Jesus: “ ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’ When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness” (1 Peter 2:22–24). To this standard all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ have been called.

The Right to Things

There are other examples in this section of Matthew’s Gospel. The next verse talks about things: “And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well” (v. 40). There was Jewish law that limited that for which a man could be sued. A man would have many undergarments, which were light and would correspond to a suit or a dress in our time, but he would have only one cloak, the heavier outer garment that corresponds to a coat. Jewish law recognized that this garment was necessary for a man’s well-being, and hence, although he could be sued for his suit, he could not be sued for that which alone would keep him warm in winter or protect him from the chill of the night air if he slept outside on the ground (Exod. 22:26–27). Naturally, all the poor (and the rich) among Christ’s listeners knew this law. So, when Jesus said that they were not to be unwilling to spare their coat, he was actually saying that even if the law protected them, they were still not to live by the rights to their possessions.

What does that mean for us? Well, it refers to our property at least—to our homes, automobiles, clothes, food, and other things. And it tells us that these things are not ours to

hold and guard jealously. Instead, we must recognize that all that we have comes from the Lord and is to be used in the best possible way to his glory.

The Right to Our Time and Money

The third example Jesus gave is the right to our time, for he said, “If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles” (v. 41). This is a picture of which we know very little, for it comes from the experience of those who live in an occupied country. In such a situation a member of the conquered nation might at any moment be compelled to serve the conquering power, even if it meant the neglect of things which he considered important and for which time was pressing. To give one example, this was what happened to Simon of Cyrene when he was pressed into service in Jerusalem to bear the cross of Jesus.

Jesus said that if a Roman should come and compel one of his disciples to go a mile with him in order to bear some burden, he was not to do it grudgingly and with obvious resentment. Instead, he was to go two miles with cheerfulness and good grace. To us that means that we are not to be resentful when people call us on the telephone and take up valuable time—just because they do not have anything to do. And we are not to be surly when we are given added work at the office, are saddled with someone else’s work, or are sent out for coffee when we are in the middle of something we think important. We are to do it cheerfully and as unto the Lord.

Finally, we are to see that we have no right to our money, for Jesus said, “Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you” (v. 42). I know we work for our money. We seem to work doubly hard today because the government and the state take so much in taxes, and yet, we are never to say, “Well, what is mine is mine. Let the other fellow work. I did it.” We are to respond to his need. And we are to do so cheerfully (2 Cor. 9:7).

This is not speaking of the professional beggar, of course, the kind who will spend all you give him to drink. It is speaking of genuine need. Nevertheless, it does teach that we are to meet that need. Actually, the instruction is exactly the same as that given to us by John, who wrote to those of his day: “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:17–18). Perhaps there are few things that reveal the true depth of our Christianity as clearly as our attitude toward money.

Cross-Bearing

What is your attitude toward what Christ is saying? Are you still dealing with the question of your rights and your wrongs? Or are you learning to live the kind of life lived for us by the Lord Jesus?

One Bible teacher has written on this subject: “Since the day that Adam took the fruit of the tree of knowledge, man has been engaged in deciding what is good and what is evil. The natural man has worked out his own standards of right and wrong, justice and injustice, and striven to live by them. Of course, as Christians we are different. Yes, but in what way are we different? Since we were converted a new sense of righteousness has been developed in us, with the result that we too are, quite rightly, occupied with the question of good and evil. But have we realized that for us the starting point is a different one? Christ is for us the Tree of Life. We do not begin from the matter of ethical right and wrong. We do not start from that other tree. We begin from *him*; and the whole question for us is one of Life.

“Nothing has done greater damage to our Christian testimony than our trying to be right and demanding right of others. We become preoccupied with what is and what is not right. We ask ourselves, have we been justly or unjustly treated? and we think thus to vindicate our actions. But that is not our standard. The whole question for us is one of cross-bearing. You ask me, ‘Is it right for someone to strike my cheek?’ I reply, ‘Of course not!’ But the question is, Do you only want to be right? As Christians our standard of living can never be ‘right or wrong,’ but the Cross. The principle of the Cross is our principle of conduct.... ‘Right or wrong’ is the principle of the Gentiles and tax gatherers. My life is to be governed by the principle of the Cross and of the perfection of the Father.”

If you are a Christian, learn soon this great spiritual lesson. Do not stand on your rights. The second mile is only typical of the third and the fourth. The cloak is only typical of all our possessions. Our time is not our own. When Jesus died for us on the cross, he did not do it to defend our right or his. It was grace that took him there. Now, as his children, we are called to the same life of self-sacrifice and Christ-like service.

2. _____ love (5:43–47)

For most people the verses that we are now to study are the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, and there is a sense in which this is both true and proper. They deal with love—Christian love. As such they contain a highly “concentrated expression of the Christian ethic,” as William Barclay notes in his commentary, and they deal with it profoundly. These verses carry the core of Christian ethics up to anchor it in the character of God, for they teach that the Christian is to love others, not as a man loves his friends, but as God loves.

Divine Love

I believe that we must put the heart of the teaching in this way, for we miss the point of the verses unless we see that the standard is a love of which only God is capable. This is evident in several ways. For one thing, verse 45 says that we are to do this in order to be sons of our Father who is in heaven, and this means that we are to do it in order that we might be godlike in our conduct. Because God’s love is without discrimination, because it extends to the just and to the unjust alike, our love is also to be without discrimination. Because it results in action, our

love is to express itself in action. We are to love those who are, by all human standards, our enemies.

The fact that this is a divine standard and not a human one is also clear in the word for love that occurs in this passage. The Greek language has four distinct words for love, and whenever one of them occurs (as opposed to another) the choice is almost always significant. The first word for love is one that the Bible never uses. It is the word *eros*, and it refers to sexual love. From it we get our words “erotic” and “erogenous.” The Bible is aware of this kind of love, of course; but in biblical times the sexual love of the Greeks had become so perverted and debased that the word *eros*, that suggested it, was rejected in biblical language as something contaminated. It is interesting, moreover, that the same thing happened years later when Jerome came to make the Latin translation of the Bible, for he chose the Latin word *caritas* while rejecting the equally common but erotic word *amor*. Thus in 1 Corinthians 13, the older, Authorized Version of the Bible speaks of faith, hope, and *charity*, not love. And it does not use the word *amorous* at all.

The second Greek word for love is *storgē*. It refers to family love. This is the love that a father and mother have for their children and that children have for their parents. This word is not in the New Testament either, although it could be.

The third word for love is *philia*. It refers to strong affection, and from it we get our words philanthropy (meaning a love for men), philharmonic (a love for music), Anglophile (a lover of England), and the name Philadelphia (city of brotherly love). This was the word which Peter used when Christ asked him if he loved with the highest of love. Peter, conscious of his recent denial, replied, “Yes, Lord, you know that I *love* you” (John 21:15–17). It is the highest love of which man in himself is capable.

There is a fourth word for love, however, and it is divine love—*agapē*. It is the word that Christ used the first two times that he put his question to Peter, “Simon son of John, do you truly love me?”—and, of course, it is the word which Jesus uses here in the Sermon on the Mount. This love is one that loves without variableness. It loves even when the object of the love is hateful or unlovely. You might say that it is love for no reason at all, or love even when there are ample reasons to discourage it. It is godlike love. The point is that such love, not erotic or family or even affectionate love, is to characterize our lives as God’s children.

Love on the Cross

We have not really seen the true extent of this divine love until we go one step further. It is true that the love to which we are called is God-love (*agape*) and that this is an inscrutable love that exists entirely apart from the possibility of being loved back. But where do we see this love if, indeed, it is God-love? Where is it demonstrated? The answer is that we see it only in Jesus Christ and in him preeminently at the cross.

Years ago, when I first began to study the subject of God's love, I made an interesting discovery that is pertinent here. I noticed that there is hardly a verse in the New Testament that speaks of God's love without also speaking in the same context of the cross. This suggests that to the biblical writers God's love was acknowledged to be seen there, not elsewhere. Think of the verses. There is John 3:16: "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*" Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who *loved me and gave himself for me.*" 1 John 4:10: "This is love: not that we loved God, but that *he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice* for our sins." Romans 5:8: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, *Christ died for us.*" In each case the cross is made the measure of God's love.

Moreover, it is not merely the fact of Christ's suffering that makes God's love so wonderful. It is also the fact that he suffered for sinners, and this means for those who were in themselves naturally repugnant to him.

Every so often during the summer we hear of a lifeguard who has rescued some person from drowning, and once in a while of one who has lost his life while trying to save a person. Stop a moment and imagine yourself in his position. You are the handsome lifeguard, and a beautiful girl is drowning. Would you risk your life for hers? You are probably saying, "I am not sure, of course; but yes, I think I might." I agree with you. Many persons would do it, or attempt to do it. But now picture in your mind the most contemptible person you know—the one who has wronged you or cheated you, a pervert, a murderer—imagine him drowning. Would you give your life for his? It is not so easy to answer the question this time, for it now begins to show us something of the love of the Lord Jesus Christ for us. That is why the Bible says, "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:7–8). It was while we were hideous to God that he loved us and died for us.

There is one point here that should also be mentioned. The same verses that tell us that Christ died for us while we were yet sinners also tell us that he died for us while we were helpless, without strength. There was no possibility of our ever helping ourselves out of our lost condition.

Many persons think that there is a good bit that they can achieve for themselves spiritually, but the Bible teaches differently. For one thing, it says that apart from God's saving work through Christ natural man cannot understand Christ's teachings. Thus, Jesus spoke even to the religious leaders of his day, saying, "Why is my language not clear to you?" and answered, "Because you are *unable* to hear what I say" (John 8:43). In other words, the natural man has ears to hear, but he hears not.

Second, the natural man cannot receive the Holy Spirit. For Jesus said to his disciples, "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of

truth. The world *cannot* accept him” (John 14:16–17). This verse teaches that no one can be saved by receiving the Spirit as an act of his own will.

Third, the Bible teaches that the unsaved man cannot use his will to submit himself to God’s law. In fact, he is impelled to rebel against it. “The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor *can it do so*” we are told in Romans 8:7.

Fourth, “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and *he cannot* understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). The unsaved person cannot understand God’s truth. Finally, 2 Peter 2:14 says of the person apart from Christ that having eyes full of adultery “they never stop sinning.”

If we put all these teachings together we see that God’s love is to be measured by the fact that while we were sinners and were unable to hear his word, receive the Holy Spirit, submit to his law, understand his teaching, or cease from sin Christ died for us. That is God’s love. That is the full measure of God’s love. It is that love to which we are called as God’s children.

Loving, Not Liking

At this point a person may be saying, “Well, if that is the standard, I may as well admit right now that I cannot attain it.” That is true. In yourself you cannot attain it. That love is possible only to those in whom the Lord Jesus Christ is working and in whom his love dwells. If you are not a Christian, you must begin by becoming one and asking him to create that love in you, or, if you are a Christian but are far from the Lord, you must draw near to him and ask him to work out that love in you.

It is possible, however, that you are a Christian and that you are attempting to walk with the Lord, and yet you find this love remote and unattainable. If that is your case, you may be helped by a very important distinction. That distinction is that loving is not necessarily the same thing as liking. To like someone is to have a certain emotional feeling toward them, and because we cannot entirely control our feelings it is not always possible to like everybody. I am not even sure that we should. I believe, for instance, that there is a sense in which we can say that God does not really like the way we are. But he does love us, and that is an entirely different thing. Love is not a matter of the feelings; it is a matter of the will. And because it is of the will and not of the feelings, it is something that is always possible and that may always express itself in good actions. This we can do—whether or not we feel like it.

Moreover, this is implied in the commands to love that God gives us. If love depended on our feelings, it would be foolish for Jesus to say, “Love one another” or “Love your enemies.” It could not be done. But if love is a matter of the will and if our wills are surrendered to him, it can be done; and we can love our enemies just as we can also bless them that curse us, do good to them that hate us, and pray for them that despitefully use us and persecute us. Certainly Jesus implied this as he linked these four positive commands together in this saying.

I have found the late C. S. Lewis of Cambridge, England, most helpful at this point. Lewis writes, “The rule for all of us is perfectly simple. Do not waste your time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbour; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less.... The difference between a Christian and a worldly man is not that the worldly man has only affections or ‘likings’ and the Christian has only ‘charity.’ The worldly man treats certain people kindly because he ‘likes’ them; the Christian, trying to treat every one kindly, finds himself liking more and more people as he goes on—including people he could not even have imagined himself liking at the beginning.”

If you are having difficulty with the need to love others, try this suggestion and see if God will not use it to lead you into a fuller experience of his great love and power.

Conclusion

“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” The sum of all that Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount—in fact, the sum of all He teaches in Scripture—is in those words. The great purpose of salvation, the goal of the gospel, and the great yearning of the heart of God is for all men to become like Him.

Teleios (**perfect**) basically means to reach an intended end or a completion and is often translated “mature” (1 Cor. 2:6; 14:20; Eph. 4:13; etc.). But the meaning here is obviously that of perfection, because the **heavenly Father** is the standard. The “sons of [the] Father” (v. 45) are to be **perfect, as [their] heavenly Father is perfect**. That perfection is absolute perfection.

That perfection is also utterly impossible in man’s own power. To those who wonder how Jesus can demand the impossible, He later says, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26). That which God demands, He provides the power to accomplish. Man’s own righteousness is possible, but is so imperfect that it is worthless; God’s righteousness is impossible for the very reason that it is perfect. But the impossible righteousness becomes possible for those who trust in Jesus Christ, because He gives them His righteousness.

That is precisely our Lord’s point in all these illustrations and in the whole sermon—to lead His audience to an overpowering sense of spiritual bankruptcy, to a “beatitude attitude” that shows them their need of a Savior, an enabler who alone can empower them to meet God’s standard of perfection.²

² John F. MacArthur Jr., *Matthew*, vol. 1, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 349–350.

Lesson 25 (6-30-24)

Holy One or Hypocrite? (Matthew 6:1-8, 16-18)

⁶ “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

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

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

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

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

- Matthew 6:1-8, 16-18 ESV

WE HUMAN BEINGS are a strange lot. We hear high moral injunctions and glimpse just a little the genuine beauty of perfect holiness, and then prostitute the vision by dreaming about the way others would hold us in high esteem if we were like that. The demand for genuine perfection loses itself in the lesser goal of external piety; the goal of pleasing the Father is traded for its pygmy cousin, the goal of pleasing men. It almost seems as if the greater the demand for holiness, the greater the opportunity for hypocrisy. This is why I suspect that the danger is potentially most serious among religious leaders.

Jesus, having demanded of his followers nothing less than perfection (5:48), is fully aware of the human heart's propensity for self-deception, and issues a strong warning. “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven” (6:1). Be perfect (5:48), but be careful (6:1). The question of whose approval we are seeking is thus raised in another form. Just as the beatitudes ask me if it is God's blessing I want, or some other approval, so the demands of righteousness, as

presented by Jesus, can never legitimately be confused with forms of external piety: the righteousness in question pleases the Father and is rewarded by him.

Jesus reserves Matthew 6:1 for the general principle: All “acts of righteousness” must be preserved from the ostentation of showmanship and from the degradation of the chase for human approval. Then in verses 2–18, he focuses on the three fundamental acts of Jewish piety, almsgiving (6:2–4), prayer (6:5–15), and fasting (6:16–18). He selects these three to represent all other “acts of righteousness,” treating each in the same way. First, he offers a description and a denunciation of that particular form of ostentatious piety typical of the more degenerate forms of Pharisaism, both ancient and modern. Second, he gives an ironic affirmation of the limited results of such pseudo-piety: the actors receive their reward in full. The reward is understood to be the acclaim of the fickle crowd. And that is all the actors get. Third, he presents a contrasting description of true piety and its results.¹

Discussion Questions

According to Jesus, what is the spiritual danger in religious practices like giving to those in need? How will you avoid this danger?

In verse 1, Jesus commands us “not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them.” Yet in 5:16 he said, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good deeds.” Is there a contradiction here? Explain.

What does Jesus mean when he says, “But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (v. 3)? What is this important (vv. 2,4)?

In what ways are we tempted to be hypocritical in our giving?

What was wrong with the way hypocrites prayed in Jesus’ day (v. 5)?

In what ways do hypocrites pray today?

Why and how is our praying to be different (v. 6)?

¹ D. A. Carson, *Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World: An Exposition of Matthew 5–10* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1999), 59–60.

What's the difference between the reward the Father will give us (v.6) and the reward the hypocrites receive (v.5)?

How do pagan prayers (v.7) differ from the persistent prayers Jesus himself offered (Matthew 26:44)?

In what ways might we be guilty of mindless, meaningless prayers?

If, as Jesus says in verse 8, God already knows what we need, why should Christians pray?

In verse 16, Jesus assumes Christians will fast. Why and how should we fast (vv.16-18)?

Fasting was a way that people were trying to seek the approval of others. In what other areas are we tempted to seek the approval of people rather than of God?

Was there anything from last week's sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from *Daniel M. Doriani, The Sermon on the Mount: The Character of a Disciple (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 107–116.*]

It would be helpful if we could find a way to judge if the people we meet are or are not holy. If we meet someone at a Bible study or even at a monastery, it may be a good sign. But who knows? He might be a sinner who is merely contemplating repentance. We cannot judge holiness by the way someone looks. Ostentatious clothing will raise questions, but both saints and sinners generally dress according to the norms of their culture. We might be able to tell more by looking in someone's car. Is the radio preset for at least one Christian station? What kinds of recorded music float about the cabin? But most people listen to all kinds of music. Perhaps we could learn more if we attached a position locator to the car's frame to see if it goes to church on Sunday or not. Would that be enough? No, because Jesus says a man can give every appearance of righteousness and not be righteous at all.

Righteousness Exceeding That of the Pharisees, Revisited

In Matthew 5, Jesus described the *moral* demands of discipleship. Disciples ought to keep the law and ought to do so for the right reasons. Now Matthew 6 describes the *religious* demands of discipleship. Jesus says that true disciples perform their religious duties from the heart.

In Jesus' day, there were three signs of piety, three tokens of religious devotion: gifts to the poor, prayer, and fasting. A popular book from around 200 B.C. said, "Prayer is good when it is accompanied by fasting, almsgiving and righteousness" (Tobit 12:8). Jesus mentions the same three practices, but his emphasis does not fall on the deeds themselves. Rather, he first warns his disciples not to miss the point of doing them: "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them.... So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full" (6:1–2).

We must clarify Jesus' teaching. He does not mean we must always hide our good deeds. He does not say that it is wrong to be seen praying. Rather, it is wrong to pray in order to be seen. He does not say it is wrong to be seen giving a gift to the needy. But it is wrong to give in order to be seen giving. As Jesus went on to say, "When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (6:3–4).

If we regularly invite the divorced and the widowed to holiday dinners, or if we invite the singles and college students to share a Sunday meal, then someone will eventually discover it. It is no sin for the word to leak out that we are hospitable. But it is hypocrisy to be hospitable so that people will discover and praise our hospitality. True hospitality looks to the joy of the lonely and the needy, not the glory of the host. The desire to be recognized for doing good must not displace the simple desire to do good.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus compares his disciples to the Pharisees and pagans. We surpass the pagans, because their religion consists of mechanical forms. Jesus says, "They think they will be heard because of their many words" (6:7). Surpassing the Pharisees would seem to be harder, for they kept the law's external demands scrupulously. But Jesus requires his disciples to obey God with better motives. He says that some fulfill their duties in order to feel good about themselves or to gain a reputation for piety. But God takes no pleasure in the man who does good in order to be seen doing it:

- That man gives to the poor, not so much to help them as to be seen helping them.
- He prays, not so much to commune with God as to be seen on his knees.
- He fasts, not so much to devote himself to God as to be seen fasting.

Perhaps no one sets out to be a hypocrite. The hypocrite may start well, doing good innocently. Later, he thinks, "It would be good if others knew what I do. My example might inspire them." Finally, he takes steps to insure that others see and praise his piety. We trade the goal of pleasing the Father for the goal of pleasing men.

There is another kind of hypocrisy. A hypocrite may first fool himself and then deceive others. This hypocrite may be sincere at one level, but at another level he suspects that he is fooling himself. Henri Nouwen, a professor of pastoral theology at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard, describes the way today's holy man can deceive himself: "As I entered into my fifties ... I came face to face with the simple question, 'Did becoming older bring me closer to Jesus?' ... I found myself praying poorly, living somewhat isolated from other people, and very much preoccupied with burning issues."

Everyone told him he was doing well. Nonetheless, Nouwen says, something inside him told him that his soul was in danger, that the Spirit was being suppressed, that something had to change. Nouwen did change things, leaving academia to live and to serve, many hours each week, in a community for people with great mental and physical challenges. He did so to avoid becoming a subtle kind of spiritual hypocrite. This hypocrite performs frantically for others. He impresses others with his ministry, even while his own soul withers away. Nouwen understood that we miss Jesus' point if we condemn others for hypocrisy and don't watch ourselves.

Every pastor, every missionary, runs the same risk. We can starve our own souls while nourishing others. We can drown our spirit in a sea of spiritual cares. We can toil away impressively, so that everyone says, "You are doing well." At our worst, we can drink in the compliments and think, "So, it must be true."

Yet let us not run too rapidly to the present application of Jesus' message. Scripture will exert its maximum influence only if we retain our enthusiasm for the original words. Let us labor to discover precisely what the Lord said in his day, so we can hear him clearly today.

Holier Than Thou?

Jesus warns against hypocrisy, but he never says that we should avoid expressing our faith in traditional, visible ways. Indeed, he assumes that his disciples will manifest their faith in activities such as giving and praying. He does not say, "If you give to the needy ..." Rather, he says, "When you give to the needy ... When you pray ... When you fast ..." (6:2, 5, 16). When we do such things, we must beware of practicing them "in order to be seen" (6:1 ESV). Yet, since a righteous person is equally righteous in public and in private, good deeds will inevitably be seen in public. As Jesus teaches his disciples how to give to the poor, pray, and, fast, he points this out. He speaks in a string of verbal echoes and refrains that make his point as memorable as a poem:

- When you give (or pray or fast), do not do it as the hypocrites do (6:2, 5, 16):
- To be honored or seen by men (6:2, 5, 16).
- "They have received their reward" (6:2, 5, 16 ESV).
- Rather, when you give (or pray or fast), do it "in secret" (6:4, 6, 16).
- "And your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (6:4, 6, 18 ESV).

That is, if we perform for man's praise, we will receive it. In conversation, we can find ways to tell stories about our work in the soup kitchen, if we are intent on it. The audience may be impressed and may praise us, but that will be the end of the praise. The Father will not honor us in the next life, for we offered our good deeds to humans and not to him. But if we act righteously in secret, for the audience of One, he will see and reward us. So let us avoid displays of holiness.

Our culture also dislikes displays. It despises Christians who have a "holier than thou" attitude. Disciples should certainly strive to be holy. Since so many people have no interest in holiness, disciples will be holier than others. But we must avoid public posturing. We serve the living God. If he sees us, nothing else matters.

with the Right Motives (6:1–4)

Jesus said, "When you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets ... in the synagogues and on the streets" (6:2). So far as we know, no one literally had trumpeters precede them as they prepared to give gifts. But, Jesus says, picture a man with a bag of silver coins, walking down the street with trumpeters blowing their trumpets ahead of him and calling out, "Alms for the poor! Alms for the poor! Come and get it!"

People always have ways of calling attention to their gifts. In Jesus' day, the wealthy paved city streets and had their names inscribed on highly visible stones. Today, if someone gives a large gift to a university, a hospital, or another institution, a building may be named after him. A moderate gift can earn a plaque on the wall inside the building, and a humble gift can earn a name on a brick under the plaque. The hypocrite longs for such attention. The world is his stage; he hopes to impress people, to win their applause. But Proverbs 27:2 (ESV) says, "Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips."

Pastors and mission workers are also prone to self-promotion. After all, since all ministries rely on donations, we feel obligated to publicize our ministries, so people will support them. The challenge is to promote God's work without promoting ourselves.

When Jesus says, "Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing" (Matt. 6:3), he adds a new point. Not only should we avoid telling *others* about our righteous deeds, we should not even tell *ourselves*. We should have a blissful lack of self-consciousness because self-consciousness can decay into self-righteousness.

When we do something good, Jesus says, we can seek one of three goals: the praise of society, the praise we give ourselves, or the praise of the Father. Hypocrites seek glory from men. They love "praise from men more than praise from God" (John 12:43). But we can also do good so that we will feel good about ourselves, and not really for the sake of others.

When I fly, I like to help older and shorter people who struggle to get their carry-on language in or out of their overhead compartments. I like to help, but I must confess that I also like to feel

benevolent. My left hand sees what my right hand does. When we perform some good deeds, we can stand outside ourselves and admire it, as we do when we host a party and judge it a success. Whenever we watch ourselves this way, the journey to righteousness is incomplete.

Those who possess great skill often lack self-awareness of it. Michael Polanyi said, “The aim of a skillful performance is achieved by the observance of a set of rules which are not known as such to the person following them.” One can be an accomplished musician or artisan without mastering the theory behind the craft. The violin-making skills of Stradivarius died unarticulated. This can happen because we pay the most attention to skills when we begin to acquire them, such as when learning to drive—or when something is amiss, such as when our athletic performance slips. Once a skill is established, our awareness of it recedes. The musician attends to the piece of music, not the location of her left index finger.

So it should be with righteousness. When it has become second nature, there is little self-awareness. Of course, when we write a check for kingdom work, both the right hand and the left hand engage in the physical process. When we help someone, we have some awareness of our acts. But true righteousness has no vanity, no calculation, no self-congratulation, no egotism. This is what Jesus had in mind when he said that he would commend the righteous on judgment day. They will not remember when they took care of the hungry, the thirsty, or the stranger (Matt. 25:37–40).

Some object that Jesus is contradicting himself, for he also said, “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). How then can he prohibit the display of righteousness in our passage? John Stott replies that Jesus is speaking about different things:

It is our human cowardice which made him say “Let your light shine before men,” and our human vanity which made him tell us to beware of practicing our piety before men. A. B. Bruce sums it up well when he writes that we are to “show when tempted to *hide*” and “hide when tempted to *show*.” Our good works must be public so that our light shines; our religious devotions must be secret lest we boast about them.

The goal both times is the same, that the glory go to God. Our good works are public, so that God may be praised for transforming his people. Our religious acts must be private, so that the glory goes to God and not to ourselves.

Someone may also ask, “If Jesus wants us to be righteous for the sake of God, why does he say that the Father, ‘who sees what is done in secret, will reward you’ (6:4)? Doesn’t the promise of a reward reintroduce selfish motives? If we do good for the sake of God, why should we be interested in a reward?”

If we say giving earns a reward from God, this turns the act of giving into a business investment: I give to God and he gives back, with interest. At worst, this is wholly selfish, a manipulation of God for selfish advantage. At best, it pollutes an act of kindness by giving it a selfish turn at the

end. It makes the right hand think hard about what the left is doing. It makes giving a self-imposed spiritual discipline, presented to God for proper recompense. Like eating our vegetables, it is good for us.

C. S. Lewis answers that there are two kinds of reward, which I will call extrinsic and intrinsic rewards. An extrinsic reward has no natural connection to the thing done to gain the reward. Prize money for winning a piano competition is an extrinsic reward. In contrast, intrinsic rewards do have a connection with the deed performed. In pick-up basketball, the intrinsic reward for winning a game is staying on the court. Between a man and a woman, the reward for true love is a marriage where love grows and deepens for many years. The reward for youthful academic excellence is a scholarship that allows further study. These are intrinsic rewards. It seems then that the reward for service must be intrinsic—the satisfaction of serving others and relieving needs.

_____ with the Right Motives (6:5–8)

Jesus says we must not pray “to be seen by men,” but he does not forbid public prayer. Moses, Daniel, Ezra, and others prayed publicly. Jesus let his disciples see him pray. The apostles and first Christians often gathered to pray together. They heard each other pray for boldness in their testimony and for success in their mission (Acts 4:23–31; 13:3; 14:23; 20:36). When disciples pray, they simply do not care if anyone sees it or not.

Hypocritical prayers do want to be seen. “Do not be like the hypocrites,” Jesus warns (Matt. 6:5). They love to stand and pray during public worship. Crafting elegant phrases to express lofty thoughts, they hope to impress the gathered assembly with their piety. Hypocrites also love to pray outside, “on the street corners” (6:5). By custom, pious Jews living in Jerusalem were supposed to stop, drop, and pray when a trumpet blew in the temple for the daily afternoon sacrifice. The hypocrite was pleased to find himself in a public place then, so all would see him fall to his knees and pray.

Perhaps the hypocrite even arranged to be in a public place at that hour. Perhaps the hypocrite prayed sincerely at first. Then someone praised his well-phrased prayer, so that he gained a reputation for devotion. In time, he hoped to be seen or heard praying. Jesus says that if we pray to gain the approval of men, we will gain that—and nothing more. If a prayer is blind to God, God is blind to that prayer.

It is better to “go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen,” for prayer is essentially private (6:6). Public prayer has all the distractions of a public situation: limits on time, the effects of an audience, and more. In private prayer, we can ask questions, groan, or pause and admit our confusion. A secluded place is best for that. Hypocrites pray with at most one eye on God and at least one eye on their reputation. But if we attend to God in prayer, he gives us his ear: “Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (6:6).

It is the genuineness of a prayer that lets it surpass the prayers of hypocrites and pagans. Jesus rightly says that the pagans babble and use “many words” (6:7). First Kings 18:25–29 describes the prophets of Baal who prayed all day long, with shouts and bloodletting, for fire from their god. They invoked his name over and over and cut themselves, hoping to rouse him and gain his attention. Some written records of pagan prayers have survived to our day. They might invoke the names of many gods, in the hope of finding one who was both paying attention and well-disposed to what might be a simple request for health or safety. Our prayers may not be more impressive, but they have a nobler object—to speak to the living God—and a better spirit. For we do not pray to display our skill to many, but to reach an audience of one. More importantly, we do not imagine that we can extract a blessing from a reluctant deity. We trust that the Father knows what we need before we ask (Matt. 6:8).

with the Right Motives (6:16–18)

In a later chapter, we will survey the biblical teaching about fasting. For now, listen to Jesus’ warning against fasting with an improper motive, the desire to be seen by men. He says, “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting” (Matt. 6:16–18).

Jesus invites us to imagine a scene where a shallow woman is preparing to fast. She doesn’t want to boast openly about her fasting, but she thinks, “If I look a little ragged, maybe someone will ask why. So I won’t wash my hair, and I’ll skip my makeup. No, better yet, I’ll smear a little brown and gray under my eyes.”

When she arrives at work, her friends notice at once. “Lucy,” they exclaim, “what happened to you today? You look terrible. Are you all right?”

“Oh, yes,” Lucy slowly moans. “I’m fine ... but I am a little hungry, I guess.”

“Well then, can we get you something to eat?”

“Oh, no, no. You see, I’m fasting.”

“Lucy, you are so holy!”

“Well, maybe.”

The desire to be noticed is understandable but deadly. Jesus said, “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled” (Matt. 23:12). If anyone fasts “to be seen by men,” it is an act of self-exaltation. But true fasting is self-humbling. Like genuine generosity and genuine prayer, genuine fasting is, by nature, self-effacing and self-denying.

Jesus says that the Father rewards this kind of fasting: “Your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (6:18). Jesus does not say that fasting earns a reward from God. Rather, God grants a reward. Besides, if we fasted to gain a reward, it would be an attempt to manipulate God, for it sacrifices something to God in order to get it back, with interest.

In Matthew 6, Jesus shifts his focus slightly. In chapter 5, he teaches his disciples to look inward, to their character and their motives. In chapter 6, he teaches us to look upward, to live to please God, rather than to please ourselves or impress our neighbors. If we seek God and please him, he will grant the finest reward—his presence and pleasure.

Conclusion

The thrust of Matthew 6:1–18 is humbling. The Matthew 5 demand for righteousness is now complemented by the insistence that such righteousness must never become confused with pious ostentation, with play-acting piety. The question is raised in its most practical form: Whom am I trying to please by my religious practices? Honest reflection on that question can produce the most disquieting results. If it does, then a large part of the solution is to start practicing piety in the secret intimacy of the Lord’s presence. If our “acts of righteousness” are not primarily done secretly before him, then secretly they may be done to please men.

The negatives of these verses are actually an important way of getting to the supreme positive, namely, transparent righteousness. Genuine godliness, unaffected holiness, unfeigned piety—these are superlatively clean, superlatively attractive. The real beauty of righteousness must not be tarnished by sham.

God help us.²

² D. A. Carson, *Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World: An Exposition of Matthew 5–10* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1999), 79.

Lesson 26 (7-7-24)

How to Pray (Matthew 6:9-15)

⁹ Pray then like this:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

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

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread,

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

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

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

- Matthew 6:9-15 ESV

The Lord’s Prayer, or more accurately, the Disciples’ Prayer, is not a set group of words to repeat. It is fine to recite it, as we recite many parts of Scripture. It is certainly fine to memorize it and to rehearse it in our minds and meditate on it in our hearts. But it is not so much a prayer in itself as it is a skeleton which believers are to flesh out with their own words of praise, adoration, petitions, and so on. It is not a substitute for our own prayers but a guide for them. In fewer than seventy words we find a masterpiece of the infinite mind of God, who alone could compress every conceivable element of true prayer into such a brief and simple form—a form that even a young child can understand but the most mature believer cannot fully comprehend...

The purpose of prayer is seen more in the overall thrust of these verses than in any particular word or phrase. From beginning to end the focus is on God, on His adoration, worthiness, and glory. Every aspect of true righteousness, the righteousness that characterizes God’s kingdom citizens, focuses on Him. Prayer could hardly be an exception. Prayer is not trying to get God to agree with us or to provide for our selfish desires. Prayer is affirming God’s sovereignty, righteousness, and majesty and seeking to conform our desires and our purposes to His will and glory. Every facet of the Disciples’ Prayer focuses on the Almighty. Here Jesus gives a comprehensive view of all the essential elements of righteous prayer, every one of which centers on God—acknowledging His paternity, priority, program, plan, provision, pardon,

protection, and preeminence. Each element is overloaded with meaning, its truths being impossible to exhaust.¹

Discussion Questions

What does the phrase “Our Father in heaven” (v.9) tell us about God?

What does it mean to “hallow” God’s name (v.9)?

God is already King. In what sense are his kingdom and perfect will still in the future (v.10)?

What might asking God for our “daily bread” (v.11) include?

How is our Heavenly Father’s forgiveness related to our forgiving others (vv.12, 14-15)?

If God cannot tempt us and trials are beneficial (James 1:2, 13), then what is the meaning of verse 13?

How much do the priorities of God’s name, God’s kingdom, and God’s will infiltrate your prayers? How can you adjust your prayer life to better reflect the Lord’s Prayer?

Is there anyone you need to forgive?

Was there anything from last week’s sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from *Douglas Sean O’Donnell, Matthew: All Authority in Heaven and on Earth, ed. R. Kent Hughes, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 165–173.*]

¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Matthew*, vol. 1, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 371.

ONE WAY YOU KNOW that a work of art is a masterpiece is that you cannot exhaust it with observations. You can stare at it for hours and still miss important facets. And then each time you return to stare at it again you find new and wonderful aspects you never saw before, components that continue to reveal the true genius of its creator. At the center of the Sermon on the Mount (almost exactly the center, as there are 116 lines before and 114 after it) is a perfect masterpiece on prayer—the Lord’s Prayer—which is perfect in both structure and substance.

Structurally Jesus gives six petitions in two symmetrical parts. The first part, with its three petitions, focuses on God, and thus all the petitions contain the word “your” (referring to God)—“hallowed be *your* name,” “*your* kingdom come,” “*your* will be done.” These are what we might call the *divine petitions*. The second part, with its three petitions, focuses on human needs, hence the “our” and “us” in each petition—“give *us* this day *our* daily bread,” “forgive *us our* debts,” and “lead *us* not into temptation, but deliver *us* from evil.” These are the *human petitions*. For the rest of this lesson, we will focus on the substance of this prayer, or *some* of the substance, for as I said, this masterpiece on prayer is inexhaustible in its genius.

Our Father in Heaven

We start with the divine petitions, the first of which we find in verse 9: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.” Here Jesus emphasizes that God and his glory ought to be *first* in our prayers. That is not to say that the “our” is lost, certainly not. It is important as well, for the word “our” shows that this is a corporate prayer. It reminds us that we are not praying alone. We are praying with and for each other.

Beyond this community solidarity, the “our” reveals to us the often overlooked (or taken for granted) reality that God is *ours*—not, of course, in the sense that we own or possess him, but in the sense that we are in a relationship with him. The fact that we can call God “our Father” informs us that Jesus is bestowing upon us “something of his own priceless [relationship with] God.” Throughout the Gospels Jesus talks about God being his “Father.” For the first and only time in the Gospels, here he speaks of his disciples as sharing in this fellowship. God is not only Jesus’ Father but also “our Father” (cf. Romans 8:15).

But lest we get too cozy and chummy with God as “our Father,” Jesus adds some balance with the phrase “in heaven.” While this phrase might merely “designate the difference from the earthly father,”⁶ it might also reflect something of God’s infinite greatness and righteous transcendence—i.e., that “our Father” is in some sense “in the heavens or the skies.” God is “in all the skies over *every single creature* on the planet.” Psalm 33:13–15 makes the point this way: “The LORD looks down from heaven; he sees all the children of man; from where he sits enthroned he looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth, he who fashions the hearts of them all and observes all their deeds.” If this is the sense of the phrase “in heaven,” then the added point is that God in Christ may be as intimate as a father to us, but he still remains almighty. He is, as we say in the creeds, God the Father *Almighty*! Therefore, when we approach him in

prayer we ought to recognize that there is a great distance between him and us, a difference at least as vast as that between Heaven and earth.

Hallowed Be Your Name

This thought and precondition naturally moves us into the actual petition, which is, “Hallowed be your name.” That is, “May your name or reputation—who you are and what you have done—be thought of and acknowledged as holy.”

In the earliest known Christian book on prayer, *Origen’s Treatise on Prayer*, the author divides prayer into four parts: adoration, contrition, thanksgiving, and supplication. Adoration comes first, and that is precisely how Jesus starts. Jesus teaches us that we are to pray, first and foremost (what we so often don’t pray), that God’s name would be regarded by all people as holy.

Recently I learned of a church that for the purpose of reaching out to their community turned its “sanctuary” into a movie theater and its narthex into a box office. They offered free popcorn upon entrance, and I’m sure a brief candy-coated message before departure. What is taught here in this passage is a corrective to that. In the Bible what happened to people who came into the presence of God? They were struck with fear. They fell to the ground. They took off their shoes rather than putting them on the table. Even when a human encountered an angel, we often find these same reactions. The purity of an angel was overpowering to them. But in our contemporary churches, with their come-as-you-are and worship-as-you-want “praise” services, the hallowedness of God’s name is not a priority. With little or no regard for what honors God, we design church around the whims of man, and thus we are met with the oddity of a worship leader calling God’s people into God’s presence with buttered popcorn in their mouths. What flippancy! What arrogance! What blasphemy!

Just because the distinction between holy and common space has been abolished in the death of Christ (thus it is okay to meet in the basement of a children’s museum, as my church did, or a Roman catacomb, as some early Christians did), that does not mean we can approach God in private prayer or in corporate worship with carelessness and with a carefree attitude. The end of Hebrews 12 talks about this. After explaining how we have come into a new covenant through Christ’s blood, the author does not then say, “Therefore let us offer to God causal and lighthearted worship because you know God is so like way cool.” Rather he writes, “[T]hus let us offer to God acceptable worship [which means that some worship is not acceptable], with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire”—completely holy (12:28, 29). He is holy, holy, holy, and we ought never to treat him otherwise...

God’s name is holy, and we are to regard him as holy when we come to pray, gather to worship, attend the theater, ballpark, or restaurant, watch TV, or talk in the shopping mall with our friends. “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name”—that is the first petition, the first and foremost of the divine petitions.

Your Kingdom Come, Your Will Be Done

Look with me next at the second and third petitions, which I have grouped together because they naturally flow into one another. Look at verse 10: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Think of this petition in this way. God is in Heaven. While God is omnipresent, God dwells in some places in a certain, special way. Thus, his space, if you will, is up there in the unseen heavens, a place where perfect purity is observed, where his will is impeccably heeded. Our space is the earth—a place where impurity and immorality are everyday realities, where, in other words, God’s will (in the prescriptive sense) is not perfectly observed. But long ago God promised he would send a King who would establish a kingdom—a kingdom on earth in which righteousness would dwell. Matthew tells us that that King is Jesus. And when Jesus, the Son of God, took on flesh and came to earth, “the kingdom of *heaven*,” as he announced at the beginning of his ministry, was “at hand” (4:17).

The day will come, so the prophets and apostles have foretold, when God’s space will become our space. And surprisingly this will happen in a way that is counterintuitive. In the book of Revelation the picture is this: we are not taken from earth to Heaven, but rather Heaven comes to earth; the holy city, the New Jerusalem, comes down from Heaven to earth. “God’s space and ours are finally married, integrated at last.” That picture of the new heavens and new earth is at the very heart of this petition. We are pleading with God to give us Jesus—“Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” (Revelation 22:20)—that he as the King of kings would come again to reign supremely so that “[his] will” might conquer all once and for all...when Christ returns in glory he will have the heads of all evil rulers and all disobedient people under his foot. Then, finally and absolutely, the will of Heaven will become the way of earth.

So “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” is an extraordinary thing to ask for. And its extraordinariness is why I think we don’t ordinarily ask for it. Of all the petitions in the Lord’s Prayer, this one is the hardest for most of us to pray. It is hard because we fail to understand it or its full implications, but also hard because we are so concerned with ourselves and our little kingdoms. Further, we are concerned with our own name and reputation, more than with God’s name and reputation. But here Jesus corrects our self-centered prayers with his God-centered one, reminding us of what we ought to ask for first.

Give Us Our Daily Bread

From such lofty heights—the high heavens—Jesus next takes us down to earth and, almost oddly, to the amber waves of grain. He takes us from these grand spiritual concerns (about God’s name, kingdom, and will) to our everyday physical and spiritual concerns (our needs for ongoing food, forgiveness, and protection from evil).

The first of these human petitions is for daily bread—“Give us this day our daily bread” (v. 11). Some notable figures in church history (e.g., Augustine, Jerome, and Erasmus) rejected the plain interpretation that “bread” here means “bread” (or more broadly, provisions for our bodily health), and they spiritualized this petition to mean Communion bread or “the invisible

bread of the Word of God.” Erasmus, for example, “reckons it impossible that, when we come into the presence of God, Christ should enjoin us to make mention of food.” Asking God for food is not spiritual enough, so he thought. I’m not poking fun at these great men. I admire them. I read their works to learn and often emulate their otherworldly perspective. Much better than we often do, they lived in light of eternal values and realities. But here their interpretation is more otherworldly than Jesus, which is not the most spiritual place to be.

So while we are not to pray here for “our daily cake,” as one commentator humorously puts it, or “for riches [or] delicate living [or] costly raiment,” as another phrases it,¹⁶ we are to pray for bread, for daily provisions. I’ll put it this way: We are not to pray for our greeds but for our needs, for every physical and material need. “[G]ive me neither poverty nor riches; feed me [only] with the food that is *needful* for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God” (Proverbs 30:8, 9). That’s how Proverbs puts it. “Give us this day our daily bread” is how Jesus puts it. “Lord, give us what we need to live, so that we might live a life of gratitude toward you and generosity towards others.”

Forgive Us Our Debts

If we stopped here with this petition, we would miss what is even more necessary than bread for our bodies—salvation for our souls. For if we are *not* pardoned of our daily sins, then all the daily bread we have filled our bellies with throughout our whole lives only fattens us for the slaughter. So the next petition is most necessary: “forgive us our debts” (v. 12a). The sense of the petition is this: “Lord, we continually depend on you for all things—for daily food but also for daily forgiveness. So give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us this day our daily debts.” Or “trespasses,” if you prefer that word, or even “sins.” It is literally the word “sins” in Luke’s version of this prayer (Luke 11:4). That is the basic idea here in Matthew as well. We are asking God to forgive our sins.

Yet this concept of indebtedness or “debts,” which is the word Matthew uses, sheds some light on the nature of our sins. The idea is this: we owe God our complete obedience. When we fail to give our complete obedience, we become debtors, and God becomes our creditor. Now, when you think of how many times we have sinned against God, you will realize that we live “in the land of debts,” that “we are up to our ears” in debt.

You thought our national economy is bad. Our spiritual economy has been in a depression for thousands of years. Our debt is astronomical (see 18:24). We should all be embarrassed—red in the face because of how much we are in the red—personally and corporately! For this very reason I want you to recognize the apparent audacity of this petition to God to “forgive us our debts.” Think of it this way. Let’s say you owe the government \$100,000 for school loans. You are well aware of the severity of the hole you are in financially. What we are asking God to do here is like you asking the government to cancel what is owed. If you have any personal pride or honor, it seems like a shameless thing to do. But that is precisely what Jesus calls us to do. We are to put aside our pride and ask our Father for what we need—our debt forgiven.

Here Jesus does not fill in the big picture. But he knows where this Gospel of Matthew is going to end. And he knows where he is going—the cross. Our past, present, and future indebtedness can be forgiven *only* because Jesus came “to give his life as a *ransom*”—a full payment (20:28). He paid our infinite debt through his death. Jesus paid the price. Jesus paid it all. If Jesus paid it all, there would be nothing so profane as to accept forgiveness for our sins but to leave unpardoned the sins of others. That is why Jesus includes an important condition, “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (v. 12b). Jesus assumes that if we are asking for divine forgiveness, we have already been in the business of forgiving the little debts of even our biggest debtors.

John Wesley was once approached by a man who was well known for his unbending nature. In a particularly prideful moment, this man boasted to Wesley, “I never forgive.” Wesley replied, “Then I hope, sir, you never sin.” That’s funny. But, of course, there is nothing funny about the forgiven being unforgiving. Whenever I conduct interviews for church membership, I always ask, “Is there anyone in your life you have not forgiven?” This is just as important a question as asking, “Do you believe in the Trinity?” or “Do you believe Jesus is the Son of God?” or “Do you believe Jesus died for your sins?”

The Puritan Thomas Watson said, “A man can as well go to hell for not forgiving as for not believing.” That’s a strong but appropriate and memorable way of putting it, for that is what is taught later in 18:21–35 in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, but also here in 6:12b as well as in 6:14, 15, where Jesus reiterates this point (and this is the only petition he reemphasizes): “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” You see, *the forgiven must be forgiving*—not forgiving in order to be justified before God but because we are justified before God. In Ephesians 4:32 Paul expresses it this way: “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one other, as God in Christ forgave you.”

Lead Us Not ... but Deliver Us

We need forgiveness of all past sins, but we also and finally need assistance in overcoming any and all future sins. This is why Jesus teaches us next to pray, “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (v. 13). The idea here is *not*, “Lord, please don’t bring us to the place of temptation,” or “don’t allow us to be tempted.” We know from 4:1 that God’s Spirit brought Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted. So what is being asked here is rather, “Lord, don’t let us succumb to temptation,” or “don’t abandon us to temptation.” Here we find a petition for utter dependence on God’s providence, protection, and power. It is a prayer of a weak person to a strong God.

In Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* the story is told of the fate of two men under the reign of Bloody Mary. Both of these men were condemned to burn at the stake for their religious convictions. One of them boasted loudly to the other prisoners that he would be a “man” when he approached his doom, that he was so grounded in the gospel that he could not imagine denying Christ if and when he was given the opportunity. Even on the day of his execution, he spoke of

his imminent death in the most pious terms, saying that he was like a bride made ready for the wedding day.

Next to this man was a man of another disposition. Although he too was determined not to deny Christ, he admitted that he was terribly fearful of fire. He shared that he had always been very sensitive to suffering, and he was in great dread that when that first flame came near his body, he would cry out and recant, thus denying his Lord. So he urged this other man to pray for him, and he spent his time weeping over his weakness and crying out to God for strength. Befuddled by this blubbling, the other man rebuked and chided him for being so cowardly.

When they came to the stake, he who had been so bold recanted at first sight of the fire and thus was released, never to return to Christ. The other man, the trembling one, whose prayer at that moment had been, “Father, lead me not into temptation,” stood firm as a rock, praising and magnifying God as he died a cruel but courageous death. All of us must undergo various trials and temptations in order that God might test the authenticity of our faith. We are all tested as if by fire. So, our prayer should be that though tested, we are not consumed.

Temptation is one thing, but evil another. So Jesus teaches that we are to pray not only “lead us not into temptation,” but also “deliver us from evil” and/or “the evil one” (v. 13). The word here for “deliver” can be rendered “snatch.” It is a most aggressive word. So here we are asking God, with his divine hand, to snatch us from Satan. “Lord, grab us from the grip of the evil one and his evil ways” is the sense of the prayer. The parallelism plays out as follows: Lead us not into temptation (i.e., lead us not into Satan’s temptations), but deliver us from the evil one (i.e., deliver us from Satan).

That is how the Lord’s Prayer ends. It ends quite abruptly and seemingly oddly, with the word “evil” or “evil one.” This abrupt and seemingly odd ending was what likely prodded a scribe somewhere down the line to tack on a doxology, “For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.” It is a beautiful doxology, and the words are Biblical, for similar words are found in 1 Chronicles 29:11. However, such words are not found in the earliest and most reliable Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. Thus, the “evil” ending, if you will, is the original ending. And the purpose of that original ending may be to convey the grand contrast with the original opening. In Greek the first word of the Lord’s Prayer is “Father,” and the last words are “evil one.” The structural point then is something like: As children of Jesus’ Father, who live our daily lives between God and the devil, we must recognize the warning here and therefore offer up in this last petition a real and “raw cry for help” —“Help me, Lord, to remain faithful to you.”

We are not spiritual superheroes, but we must be prayer warriors, warring for our very souls. So we don’t pray, “Bring on the temptations and the tempter.” We don’t go looking for tests of strength. We realize, as Jesus said, that “sufficient for the day is its own trouble” (6:34), and may I add also “temptations” and “evils.” *O Lord, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*

Conclusion

The Lord's Prayer is comprehensive. It chides hypocrites whose grand prayers parade their spirituality. It rebukes pagans who repeat the names of the gods, trying to force them to grant favors. As a believer's prayer, it begins with God's glory and ends with his generosity.

This prayer addresses the full range of human need. Jesus bids us to take every need to the triune God. We pray for daily bread, and the Creator meets our physical needs. We pray for forgiveness, and the redeeming Son meets that need when we turn to him by faith. We seek deliverance from evil, and the Spirit meets our moral need by leading us away from temptation.

In the Lord's Prayer, God meets us and brings us to himself. Proper self-interest and love of God meet. We pour out our needs to God because we trust him, and he answers us because he loves us.²

² Daniel M. Doriani, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Character of a Disciple* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 140–141.

Lesson 27 (7-14-24)

Treasures in Heaven (Matthew 6:19-24)

¹⁹ “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

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

²⁴ “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

- Matthew 6:19-24 ESV

Worldly-mindedness is a common and fatal symptom of hypocrisy, for by no sin can Satan have a surer and faster hold of the soul, under the cloak of a profession of religion. Something the soul will have, which it looks upon as the best thing; in which it has pleasure and confidence above other things. Christ counsels to make our best things the joys and glories of the other world, those things not seen which are eternal, and to place our happiness in them. There are treasures in heaven. It is our wisdom to give all diligence to make our title to eternal life sure through Jesus Christ, and to look on all things here below, as not worthy to be compared with it, and to be content with nothing short of it. It is happiness above and beyond the changes and chances of time, an inheritance incorruptible.

The worldly man is wrong in his first principle; therefore all his reasonings and actions therefrom must be wrong. It is equally to be applied to false religion; that which is deemed light is thick darkness. This is an awful, but a common case; we should therefore carefully examine our leading principles by the word of God, with earnest prayer for the teaching of his Spirit. A man may do some service to two masters, but he can devote himself to the service of no more than one. God requires the whole heart, and will not share it with the world. When two masters oppose each other, no man can serve both. He who holds to the world and loves it, must despise God; he who loves God, must give up the friendship of the world. ¹

Discussion Questions

In our society, how is success usually measured? What alternative does Jesus propose?

¹ Matthew Henry and Thomas Scott, *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), Mt 6:19.

What do you think Jesus means by “treasures in heaven” (v. 20)?

Why should we store up heavenly treasures rather than earthly ones (vv.19-21)?

Does this mean that we cannot have personal property, savings accounts, or insurance policies? Explain.

How would you explain verse 21 (For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also) to a friend or coworker?

What does your attitude about money and possessions reveal about your values and loyalties in life (Matt. 6:19–24)? If Jesus analyzed your life, what would he say your treasure is?

How are physical and spiritual sight (or blindness) similar (vv.22-23)?

What things distort your vision of life and your value before God?

Many people hold two jobs and are able to satisfy two bosses. So why would Jesus say that it is impossible to serve two masters—God and money (v. 24)?

How will the crucial choices we make in verses 19-24 affect our ability to live free from worry (v.25)?

Was there anything from last week’s sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from *Daniel M. Doriani, The Sermon on the Mount: The Character of a Disciple (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 155–169.*]

Jesus taught more about wealth than about any other social issue—more than marriage, politics, work, sex, or power. His teaching about money stands in a discussion of discipleship and loyalty to God. Few people set out to live for wealth. No one wants to *serve* wealth; we

want wealth to serve us! Yet the love of money can gradually take control of our hearts. This is the danger, the false god, that Jesus addresses.

Two _____ (6:19–21)

Treasures on Earth

Jesus begins with two simple commands: Do not store up for yourself treasures on earth. Do store up treasures in heaven. Next, he offers two reasons not to store up treasures on earth: There moth and rust destroy (two evil agents do one evil thing). There thieves break in and steal (one evil agent does two evil things). Jesus forbids the hoarding of treasure, whether the hoarding is for selfish indulgence today or for the future. He forbids the forms that hoarding took in antiquity: valuable clothes, which moths might eat, and precious metals, which might corrode. If he spoke today, he would address our houses, cars, furnishings, and retirement plans.

Jesus mentions two kinds of loss. First, we suffer the *passive* harm of rust, moths, and decay. Things fall apart. Entropy is relentless. Wood rots, threads fray, metal rusts, and inflation erodes savings. There is a worm, one millimeter in length, with a fourteen-day life span. Researchers have determined that necrosis sets in after eleven or twelve days, and the worm begins to get flabby. Worms, like everything else, fall apart.

Second, we suffer *active* harm. Jesus says thieves break in and steal. Thievery represents all violent acts that destroy property: wars, fires, floods, and all the rest. Burglar alarms, rust-proof paint, and hedge funds can slow the decay of wealth, but they cannot stop it. Money flies from our hands. Even if it grows in this life, it leaves us when we die. Solomon said, “Naked a man comes from his mother’s womb, and ... so he departs” (Eccl. 5:15). Therefore, we should store up treasures in heaven, where they are safe, guarded by the God who also guards us.

Jesus does not ban savings or financial planning or ownership of property. Indeed, the Bible praises those who work and prepare for winter, for the lean season (Gen. 41; Prov. 6:6–10). Parents should save for their children (2 Cor. 12:14). The Bible expects us to use God’s good creation joyfully. God “richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 Tim. 6:17).

But Jesus does ban the godless, selfish accumulation of goods—heaping up possessions and savings beyond the ability to enjoy or spend them. James warns those who live in luxury and self-indulgence, “You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter”—that is, judgment day (James 5:5). The same godlessness that leads to hoarding also leads to a hard heart—to neglect of the needy and exploitation of the poor (James 5:4–6).

Jesus also forbids the dream that life consists in the abundance of our possessions (Luke 12:15). He warns us not to tether our hearts to this world. When Jesus says, “Don’t lay up treasures,” he does not forbid joyful living or financial planning. He does forbid greed and love of money and selfish luxury. Some people are confused by this. They ask, “How do I enjoy this world

without loving it? How do I enjoy wealth without living for it?” Jesus says, “Store up treasures in heaven.” The New Testament stresses that we store up treasures in heaven by giving generously of them on earth. If we live in covenant faithfulness, in loyalty to the Lord, we will be Christlike and give sacrificially...

Because God is generous and full of grace, we must be generous (2 Cor. 9:8). The motivation is not duty or compulsion, but joy in God’s gifts. God saves liberally and provides for us daily. Our generosity keeps the cycle going. That does not mean that if we give money away, we will automatically receive yet more in return (no matter what certain advocates of the prosperity gospel say). But liberality is part of the blessed life. God makes us “rich in every way,” so that we “can be generous on every occasion” (2 Cor. 9:11). By our generosity, we lay up treasures in heaven. When we give our money to God’s causes, we show where our heart is.

Treasures in Heaven

Jesus says that we ought to store up treasures in heaven, rather than on earth. The reasons, he says, are the positive counterparts of the reasons not to store up treasures on earth. Moth and rust do not destroy there, and thieves do not break in and steal. Heaven is the safest place to store our treasures. Our treasures are safe there, and we are safer when we put them there, “for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21). If we place our treasure in heaven, our heart will follow and be as safe as the treasure.

We lay up treasures in heaven by investing in God’s causes and God’s people. The effects of such investments last forever. We store treasures in heaven by worshiping God, growing in knowledge and grace, and growing in love for God and neighbor. Financially, we store treasures in heaven by using money for kingdom causes, by giving money to the church, to missions, to Christian schools, to the poor. When we store treasures in heaven by investing our money in God’s people, our investment will bear dividends for eternity. The Greek roots of the word “philanthropy”—meaning “love” and “mankind”—are apt. By giving, we demonstrate our love for mankind.

The value of stocks and real estate rolls up and down. The only truly safe investment is in the kingdom and the people of God. People live forever. If we put our effort into accumulating this world’s treasures, the heart probably will not be satisfied. Some years ago I gave a talk on money at a men’s retreat. A friendly, well-dressed fellow in his early forties approached me afterward. His career had gone very well, he told me without pride. “In fact,” he added, with a wry grin, “I find that I am making twice as much money as I ever dreamed possible. But somehow it still isn’t enough.”

It is unusual to earn twice as much money as one could dream possible, but it is not unusual to confess, “It still isn’t enough.” Solomon said, “I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure.... Yet when I surveyed all that ... I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless” (Eccl. 2:10–11). Cooks like to say that hunger is the best seasoning. If so, then a simple hamburger tastes better to a hungry man than a gourmet meal tastes to a well-fed man. As Solomon says, “Whoever loves money never has money enough”

(Eccl. 5:10). But if wealth never satisfies us, how can it become a god? Jesus explores that in the next verses. There he shifts from the question “Where shall we put our treasure?” to “Where shall we fix our eyes?”

Two _____ (6:22–23)

In Matthew 6:21, Jesus addresses the inner attitude, the heart. In verses 22–23, he speaks of the eye when he says, “The eye is the lamp of the body.” It might seem that Jesus is changing subject, as he shifts from the heart that desires to the eyes that see. But the terms *heart* and *eyes* can both refer to the inner person that sets life’s direction...

The Bible says the issues of life proceed from the heart. Here Jesus says the body finds its direction, for good or ill, through the eyes. A person with good sight walks in the light. A healthy eye gives direction to all of life. The eye affects the whole body, just as the heart directs all of life. Ambition to serve God throws light on everything. Ambition to serve oneself plunges all into darkness. It creates pride, makes us self-indulgent, and crushes charity.

Where We Set Our Heart

Jesus urges us to examine our eyes: “If your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness” (Matt. 6:23). Greed flows from a greedy heart. If we see someone hoarding wealth, living for wealth, Jesus wants us to focus our attention on their heart. If the eye sees little but material wealth, why so? Because their eyes are dark, because their heart is set on this earth.

We expect unbelievers to live for money. Atheists *cannot* store treasures in heaven. If there is no God and no heaven, why store wealth there? It would be absurd. Secular people inevitably store their treasures on earth. How could it be otherwise? They cannot trust God to protect or reward them when they deny his existence. Unbelief destroys the capacity to heed this command. Secular people believe that they must provide for themselves, for no one else will. If there is no personal God, no Father in heaven, hoarding is perfectly sensible. Who wants to run out of money in their one and only life?

This passage is diagnostic. If a man cannot tear his eyes away from money, if he lives for wealth, it is because his eye and heart are corrupt. If the eye is dark, there is no hope, unless God grants renewal. No one can *do* what is right unless he can *see* what is right. Therefore, Jesus’ message is not, “Try harder,” but “Examine yourself.” So if you fail to follow Jesus, if you hoard and do not give, examine yourself! You cannot do what is right without the ability to see it. On the other hand, if you know that you belong to Jesus, and yet you act as if you live for money, that is neither your true heritage nor your true self. You know better. God has set your heart on better things. You will find peace and rest when your heart goes where it belongs. Yet there is another side of the issue ...

In the original Greek of Matthew 6:22–23, there is a deliberate ambiguity. A literal translation of Jesus’ words brings out the issue: “The light of the body is the eye. If, therefore, your eye is good [or “sound”], your whole body will be light. But if your eye is evil, your whole body will be

darkness.” The words for “good” and “evil” can both have different meanings that make sense here. The word translated “good” is *haplos*. Its most basic meaning is “whole” or “healthy,” and it can also mean “clear” or “simple” or “generous” (see 2 Cor. 8:2; 9:13; James 1:5). The meanings “simple” and “generous” overlap: the generous person gives simply, not expecting any favor in return. The word translated “evil” is *ponēros*. It can mean “sick, in bad condition,” or “evil, wicked,” or “jealous, envious.” Jesus has chosen words that might merely describe an eye that is healthy or unhealthy. But he has also chosen words that apply to attitudes toward wealth—generosity or jealousy.

So we could translate 6:22–23 two ways. First, if your eye is *healthy*, or if your eye is *generous*, then the whole body will be full of light. Second, if your eye is bad, or if your eye is *evil* or *jealous*, then your whole body will be full of darkness. In first-century Palestine, as in many cultures, the “evil eye” was the jealous or covetous eye, the grudging spirit, that looks with envy on the possessions of others. Thus, Jesus warns against the jealous eye while inviting us to hear him in two ways:

Where We Fix Our Eyes

First, Jesus poses a diagnostic question: if your eye is perpetually set on riches, ask yourself, “Why am I fixated on material things?” The answer is, “Because you have given your heart to material things.” It is right, therefore, to repent and ask God to redirect your heart toward him. Second, Jesus warns us about the danger of jealousy or envy. He commands, “Do not set your eye upon material treasures or upon the riches of others.” It is a sin and can corrupt your heart.

The first point is surely the central one. If we find that our eyes are fixed on wealth, we must examine ourselves. Some people focus their lives on wealth because money is their god. But others love God and have fallen into bad habits. We spend too much time looking at the wrong things. We spend too much time in the mall or poring over mail-order catalogues. We behold costly homes, cars, furniture, and clothes... In Christ, we have a good, clear, generous eye. The child of God, renewed by the Spirit, has no divided loyalties and no ulterior motives. We seek our neighbor’s good, not his goods. When Jesus commends the clear eye, he urges disciples to live out their true identity. One way to do that is to set our eyes on the right things. The discipline of the eye reflects a heart that is set on the kingdom.

There are two lessons here. First, if you cannot take your eyes and heart off material things, if you live only for this world and its satisfactions, you must ask, “How is my heart?” Second, by setting your eyes in the wrong place, on the possessions of others, on graphic displays of affluence, you can harm your soul. Rather, let us be content with what we have.

Two _____ (6:24)

Gordon Dahl once said, “We worship our work. We work at our play. And we play at our worship.” Of course, if we worship our work, we will serve it, heart and soul. Using a Hebrew poetic form (chiasm), Jesus states this as a choice in Matthew 6:24:

No one can serve two masters.

Either he will hate the one and love the other,
or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.

You cannot serve both God and Money.

Many people doubt this statement. The antithesis—God versus money (traditionally translated “mammon”)—seems inappropriate. They wonder why God and prosperity cannot coexist. Why must they choose between God and money?

To be sure, some people *try* to serve two masters. They honor God on Sunday (if convenient), serve mammon from Monday to Friday, and reserve Saturday for themselves. But this mind-set regards faith as a hobby, like gardening. One can certainly have a job and a hobby or two. Or they view God as an employer, not a master. Surely a man can work for two employers, schedule permitting. But no one can *belong* to two masters. No slave can be the property of two owners, “for single ownership and full-time service are of the essence of slavery.” By definition, a master can demand service at *any* time. Therefore, we cannot serve two masters.

This is suggested by the name Jesus chooses for money. The term *mammon*, which means “trusted thing” or “that which one trusts.” The name is apt, for we are prone to trust money. Remember the prayer, “Give me neither poverty nor riches.... Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ ” (Prov. 30:8–9, cf. Hos. 13:6). Jeremiah commands, “Let not ... the rich man boast of his riches” (Jer. 9:23). Ezekiel says, “Because of your wealth your heart has grown proud” (Ezek. 28:5). Job says a man can speak to gold and say, “You are my security” (Job 31:24). It is all too easy to set the heart on riches (Ps. 62:10).

Living for Money

Money is not the kind of god that demands exclusive loyalty or direct worship; no prostration is necessary. Money is a god in a polytheistic land. It just wants a spot in the pantheon; a few other demigods can reside there too: status, power, pleasure. It is satisfied with casual worship and a few holy days...Jesus presents a choice between two ways of life. Will we store treasure on earth or in heaven? Will our eyes be light or dark? Will we serve God or mammon? This question speaks equally to the rich and the poor, for both can look to wealth for security. Everyone is susceptible to greed. Anyone can think that they would be happy if they had just a little more.

This is why Jesus calls money a rival god. People trust in their trust funds. They find security in their securities. They expect wealth to grant them the blessed life. Some even give money a divine name—“the Almighty Dollar.” But like every false deity, money disappoints its worshipers. One day its devotees awaken and say, “I have it all, but it isn’t enough. I still don’t know the meaning of life.”

Living for the Lord

To be a Christian is to turn “to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9). In Matthew 6, Jesus names two great idols that threaten to separate us from God. When he

taught about praying, giving, and fasting to impress people, he named reputation and status as rival gods. We cannot serve God and status. It is hypocrisy (6:1–6, 16–18).

Here Jesus labels another choice. God and mammon offer alternative ways of life, and they battle for our loyalty. Jesus forces a choice: Will we store up treasures on earth or in heaven? Will our eyes be generous or envious? Will we serve God or mammon? We know whom the Lord wants us to serve. He has told us where the lasting treasure lies. But, for the moment, he presents a choice, not a command: You can store up treasures on earth or in heaven, but not both. You can serve God or mammon, but not both. Certain traits identify those who live for mammon. Some save and save, for they feel secure only when they have a hoard of wealth. Others spend and spend, because they believe money, well spent, can gain them the good life, a life of peace and pleasure. They give away very little—perhaps one to four percent of their income—just enough to avoid feeling guilty about their greed.

Another set of traits marks those who live for God. They like to give money away, and like it better if no one notices. They are generous with their skills, giving them away (as volunteers) when appropriate, instead of charging for everything. They give the basic tithe and more, if possible. Not many, even among the noblest disciples, can entirely avoid the love of money. What shall we say when we detect service to mammon in ourselves? The same self-examination that reveals a disciple's sin also reveals deeper truths. Every believer knows and is known, loves and is loved, by God.

Money also seeks our love. It attempts to bind us to itself with promises of wealth. But wealth is an elusive lover; the object of affection slips just out of reach. As Hosea says, "She will chase after her lovers but not catch them; she will look for them but not find them." Devotees of mammon forget that God provides our grain, wine, and oil (Hos. 2:7–8). The prosperity gospel does us no favors in our battle with mammon. But even the apparently innocuous interest in stewardship can be problematic. The concept of stewardship is sound, but it can lead us to think of ourselves as "the one to whom God (wisely) entrusted his wealth" and the ones entrusted to administer it.

To love God rather than wealth, we must trust him, rather than worrying. We must not hoard, and must instead give freely to the church and to the poor. By giving, we show that our heart is fixed on the Lord, not on a corruptible cache here on earth (Luke 12:33). Consider the heart issue this way: If an agent dragged you into court and accused you of loving Jesus, could your checkbook and credit cards be summoned as evidence against you? If auditors examined your finances, would they find proof of your love of God? If our vacation and restaurant bills exceed our giving, what might that signify? To give our heart to God means to trust him to provide for our needs. We can scan a dark future and worry, or we can consider the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, and become calm, because God cares for us much more (Matt. 6:25–32). If we love God rather than mammon, it will show in each sphere of life—in our heart, mind, and strength.

Conclusion

Our Mind and Money

To love God with our minds, we first strive to think God's thoughts about wealth. The Bible says, "Everything God created is good, and ... to be ... received with thanksgiving" (1 Tim. 4:4–5). Yet Christians should never be engrossed in money (1 Cor. 7:31–35). We should believe that riches are a good servant, but a bad master, and that there is profit in learning contentment whether with a little or with much (Phil. 4:11–12; 1 Tim. 6:6).

To love God with the mind, is, second, to accept his laws about money. Mammon tries to establish its own laws, of course. When it supplants God, it reduces everything to buying and selling, value and profit. Money says people can be bought and sold as slaves (Rev. 18:13). We still say, "Everyone has his price." Even Jesus had a price tag: thirty pieces of silver. We give our mind to God when we know and live by his laws for wealth. We use it to meet basic needs: "If we have food and covering, we will be content with that" (1 Tim. 6:8). We give generously because God said that "those who are rich in this world ... [should] be generous and willing to share" (1 Tim. 6:17–18).

To love God with the mind means, third, to speak about money in ways that reiterate his truth. For example, we should not start to make our financial decisions with "Can we afford it?" Instead, we should ask, "Does this glorify God? Does it make me a better servant?" Parents must especially take care not to answer their children's petitions for toys and games simply by declaring, "We can't afford it." Those four words end the conversation very effectively at some ages and keep parents from seeming insensitive. But the subliminal message is, "The adults don't make the decisions in this family, money does." When we make decisions, we should let God and his law have the final word, not money. Wealth makes a useful servant, but a poor master.

Our Strength and Money

We serve God with our strength by refusing to select a career designed strictly to make us rich (James 4:1–4; 1 Tim. 6:6–10). We love God with our strength, first, by laboring to supply our needs (2 Thess. 3:6–10). Second, we accept only those jobs that are constructive and lawful. No Christian should be a professional gambler, for example. Third, we should do good to all in our work, by offering them something of value.

Our Heart and Money

Christians, by nature, love God more than money. We have committed our hearts to the Lord by entering into his covenant. The challenge comes in the realm of diligence and consistency. We can lose sight of the antithesis between God and money. We can drift, a little bit at a time, toward loving and serving money. We can lose our discernment and our clarity and make one decision, and then another, on the basis of money and possessions. Let us pray, therefore, that the Lord keeps our eyes clear, that he fills us with his light and truth and love. May he finish the good work that he has begun in us.

Lesson 28 (7-21-24) Overcoming Worry (Matthew 6:25-34)

²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? ²⁸ And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ³¹ Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

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

- Matthew 6:25-34 ESV

Jesus’ encouragement to “lay up treasures in heaven” and to serve only one master (6:19–24) forms a transition summing up the three passages prior to it, namely his teaching on alms, prayer, and fasting. That same transition, then, sets up Jesus’ teaching here on worry. While the previous passage called for an undivided loyalty to God and a focus on storing up treasures in heaven rather than on earth, Jesus now addresses some of the practical questions that might thereby arise. Jesus says that disciples do not need to worry about the basic needs of life such as food and clothing. The assurance that God will provide for one’s basic needs is based on the observed actions of God in nature.¹

Discussion Questions

What are things you tend to worry about?

What is the opposite of worry?

Why is worry unfaithful (v.25)?

¹ Douglas Mangum, ed., *Lexham Context Commentary: New Testament*, Lexham Context Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), Mt 6:25–34.

Why is worry unnecessary (vv.26-30)?

Why is worry unreasonable (vv.31-33)?

Why is worry unwise (v.34)?

Give examples of how people today “seek after all these things” that Jesus mentions (v.32).

Why and how are our ambitions to be different from those of non-Christians (vv.32-34)?

In light of this passage, do you need to change any of your goals or ambitions?

How are you intentionally seeking first God’s kingdom and righteousness?

Was there anything from last week’s sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from *John F. MacArthur Jr., Matthew, vol. 1, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 417–427.*]

In Matthew 6:19–24 Jesus focuses on the attitude toward luxury, the unnecessary physical possessions men store and stockpile for selfish reasons. In verses 25–34 He focuses on the attitude toward what men eat, drink, and wear, the necessities of life that they absolutely must have to exist. The first passage is directed particularly at the rich and the second particularly at the poor. Both being rich and being poor have their special spiritual problems. The rich are tempted to trust in their possessions, and the poor are tempted to doubt God’s provision. The rich are tempted to become self-satisfied in the false security of their riches, and the poor are tempted to worry and fear in the false insecurity of their poverty.

Whether men are wealthy or poor—or somewhere in between—their attitude toward material possessions is one of the most reliable marks of their spiritual condition. Man as an earthly creature is naturally concerned about earthly things. In Christ we are recreated as heavenly beings and, as children of our heavenly Father, our concerns should now focus primarily on heavenly things—even while we still live on earth. Christ sends us into the world to do His work,

just as the Father sent Him into the world to do the Father's work, But we are not to be "of the world" even as Jesus Himself, while on earth, was "not of the world" (John 17:15–18). One of the supreme tests of our spiritual lives, then, is how we now relate to those two worlds. Sixteen of the thirty-eight parables of Jesus deal with money. One out of ten verses in the New Testament deals with that subject. Scripture offers about five hundred verses on prayer, fewer than five hundred on faith, and over two thousand on money. The believer's attitude toward money and possessions is determinative...

Unfortunately, there is little evidence that even most modern evangelicals themselves are any longer committed to such an ethic. We give much more evidence of following the worldly trends of our day than of setting, confronting, or modifying them. In light of that fact, it is difficult for most of us to identify with Jesus' warning not to worry about basic necessities. We are well fed, well clothed, and well fixed in all other necessary things, and in many things that are totally unnecessary. The heart of Jesus' message in our present passage is: Don't worry—not even about necessities. He gives the command, **Do not be anxious** three times (vv. 25, 31, 34) and gives four reasons why worry, being **anxious**, is wrong:

Worry Is _____ Because of Our Master (6:25)

For this reason refers back to the previous verse, in which Jesus declares that a Christian's only Master is God. He is therefore saying, "Because God is your Master, **I say to you, do not be anxious.**" A bondsman's only responsibility is to his master, and for believers to worry is to be disobedient and unfaithful to their Master, who is God. For Christians, worry and anxiety are forbidden, foolish, and sinful...

Worry is the sin of distrusting the promise and providence of God, and yet it is a sin that Christians commit perhaps more frequently than any other. The English term *worry* comes from an old German word meaning to strangle, or choke. That is exactly what worry does; it is a kind of mental and emotional strangulation, which probably causes more mental and physical afflictions than any other single cause.

It has been reported that a dense fog extensive enough to cover seven city blocks a hundred feet deep is composed of less than one glass of water—divided into sixty thousand million droplets. In the right form, a few gallons of water can cripple a large city. In a similar way, the substance of worry is nearly always extremely small compared to the size it forms in our minds and the damage it does in our lives. Someone has said, "Worry is a thin stream of fear that trickles through the mind, which, if encouraged, will cut a channel so wide that all other thoughts will be drained out."

Worry is the opposite of contentment, which should be a believer's normal and consistent state of mind. Every believer should be able to say with Paul, "I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled

and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need” (Phil. 4:11–12; cf. 1 Tim. 6:6–8).

A Christian’s contentment is found in God, and only in God—in His ownership, control, and provision of everything we possess and will ever need....The needs that Jesus mentions here are the most basic—what we **eat**, what we **drink**, and what we **put on**. Those are things that every person in every age has needed; but because most western Christians have them in such abundance, they are not often worried about. Throughout Bible times, however, food and water could seldom be taken for granted. When there was little snow in the mountains there was little water in the rivers, and inadequate rainfall was frequent. Shortage of water naturally brought shortage of food, which seriously affected the whole economy and made clothes harder to buy. Yet Jesus said, **do not be anxious** for any of those things.

Those things are important, and the Lord knows and cares about our need of them, as Jesus goes on to explain. But, He asks rhetorically, **Is not life more than food, and the body than clothing?** All three of those necessities pertain to the body, and Jesus says that the fullness of **life** is more than merely taking care of the body...Even as Christians we are sometimes caught up in the world’s idea that we live because of our bodies. And since we think we live because of our bodies, we live *for* our bodies. We know better, of course, but that is the way we often act. Our bodies in themselves are not the source of anything. They do not give us life but are given life by God, who is the source of all life—spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical. Therefore, whether the Lord gives us more or gives us less of *anything*, it all belongs to Him, as owner, controller, and provider. It is our responsibility to thank Him for what He gives and to use it wisely and unselfishly for as long as He entrusts us with it.

Worry Is _____ Because of Our Father (6:26–30)

The basic thrust of these verses is that a believer has absolutely no reason to worry, because God is his **heavenly Father**. “Have you forgotten who your Father is?” He asks. To illustrate His point Jesus shows how unnecessary and foolish it is to worry about food, about life expectancy, or about clothing.

Worry About Food (6:26)

There are many birds in northern Galilee, and it is likely that Jesus pointed to some passing birds as He said, **Look at the birds of the air**. As an object lesson, He called attention to the fact that birds do not have intricate and involved processes for acquiring food. **They do not sow, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns.**

Like every creature, **birds** have their life from God. But God does not say to them, in effect, “I’ve done My part; from now on you’re on your own.” The Lord has provided them with an abundance of food resources and the instinct to find those resources for themselves and their offspring. **Your heavenly Father feeds them.** He “prepares for the raven its nourishment, when its young cry out to God” (Job 38:41; cf. Ps. 147:9).

If God so carefully takes care of such relatively insignificant creatures as birds, how much more will He take of those who are created in His own image, and who have become His children through faith? **Are you not worth much more than they?**

...Jesus does not suggest that birds do nothing to feed themselves. Anyone who has observed them even for a little while is impressed with their diligence and persistence in foraging for food. Many birds spend the greater part of their time and energy finding food for themselves, their mates, and their young. But they do not worry about where their next meal is going to come from. They gather food until they have enough, and then go about whatever other business they may have until time for the next meal. Birds only eat excessively when humans put them in cages. They never worry about or stockpile their food. Certain species store seeds or nuts for winter, but they do so out of instinctive sense, not out of fear or worry. Much less do they stockpile simply for the sake of gloating over their hoard. In their own limited way they illustrate what we should know: that the **heavenly Father feeds them**.

Yet no bird is created in the image of God or recreated in the image of Christ. No bird was ever promised heirship with Jesus Christ throughout all eternity. No bird has a place prepared for him in heaven. And if God gives and sustains life for birds, will He not take care of us who are His children and who *have* been given all those glorious promises?

Worry About Longevity (6:27)

The second illustration has to do with life expectancy. Our culture is obsessed with trying to lengthen life. We exercise, eat carefully, supplement our diets with vitamins and minerals, get regular physical checkups, and do countless other such things in the hope of adding a few years to our lives.

Yet God has bounded the life of every person. Exercise, good eating, and other common-sense practices are beneficial when done in a reasonable way and looked at in the right perspective. They no doubt can improve the quality and productivity of our lives, but they will not force God into extending our **life's span**. You can worry yourself to death, but not to life. Dr. Charles Mayo, of the famous Mayo Clinic, wrote, "Worry affects the circulation, the heart, the glands and the whole nervous system. I have never met a man or known a man to die of overwork, but I have known a lot who died of worry." The gift of life is a gift from God to be used for His purposes, for spiritual and heavenly reasons, not selfish and earthly ones. Our concern should be to obey, honor, please, and glorify Him, leaving everything else to His wisdom and care.

Worry About Clothing (6:28–30)

The third illustration has to do with clothing, using flowers as a model. Some of the people to whom Jesus spoke perhaps had little clothing, no more than one set of coverings for their bodies. He pointed again to their surroundings, this time to the flowers, to assure them of God's concern and provision.

The lilies of the field may have been a general term used of the wild flowers that in great variety and beauty grace the fields and hillsides of Galilee. Those beautiful decorations of

nature make no effort to grow and had no part in designing or coloring themselves. **They do not toil nor do they spin**, Jesus said, stating the obvious; **yet I say to you even Solomon in all his glory did not clothe himself like one of these...**

Our worries today are seldom for necessary clothing. If Jesus told those who had but one simple garment not to worry about their clothing, what would He say to us? Despite their beauty, however, flowers do not last long. Along with **the grass of the field**, they are **alive today and tomorrow [are] thrown into the furnace...**

But if God bothers to array the grass of the field with beautiful but short-lived flowers, how **much more** is He concerned to clothe and care for His very own children who are destined for eternal life? To be anxious even about things which we need to survive, Jesus says, is sinful and shows **little faith**. A person who worries about those things may have saving faith, but he does not have faith that relies on God to finish what He has begun. It is significant that each of the four other times Jesus used the phrase “O men [or “you”] of little faith,” it was also in relation to worry about food, clothing, or life span (see Matt. 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; Luke 12:28). “You believe that God can redeem you, save you from sin, break the shackles of Satan, take you to heaven where He has prepared a place for you, and keep you for all eternity,” Jesus is saying; “and yet you do not trust Him to supply your daily needs?” We freely put our eternal destiny in His hands, but at times refuse to believe He will provide what we need to eat, drink, and wear.

Worry is not a trivial sin, because it strikes a blow both at God’s love and at God’s integrity. Worry declares our heavenly Father to be untrustworthy in His Word and His promises. To avow belief in the inerrancy of Scripture and in the next moment to express worry is to speak out of both sides of our mouths. Worry shows that we are mastered by our circumstances and by our own finite perspectives and understanding rather than by God’s Word. Worry is therefore not only debilitating and destructive but maligns and impugns God.

Worry Is _____ Because of Our Faith (6:31–33)

Worry is inconsistent with our faith in God and is therefore unreasonable as well as sinful. Worry is characteristic of unbelief. *Ethnoi* (**Gentiles**) literally means simply “peoples,” or “a multitude.” In the plural form, as here, it usually referred to non-Jews, that is, to **Gentiles** and, by extension, to unbelievers or pagans. Worrying about **what to eat, drink, and clothe** themselves with are **things the Gentiles eagerly seek**. Those who have no hope in God naturally put their hope and expectations in things they can enjoy now. They have nothing to live for but the present, and their materialism is perfectly consistent with their religion. They have no God to supply their physical or their spiritual needs, their present or their eternal needs, so anything they get they must get for themselves. They are ignorant of God’s supply and have no claim on it. No heavenly Father cares for them, so there is reason to worry.

The gods of the **Gentiles** were man-made gods inspired by Satan. They were gods of fear, dread, and appeasement who demanded much, promised little, and provided nothing. It was natural that those who served such gods would **eagerly seek** whatever satisfactions and

pleasures they could while they could. Their philosophy is still popular in our own day among those who are determined to grab all the gusto they can get. “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” is an understandable outlook for those who have no hope in the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:32).

But that is a completely foolish and unreasonable philosophy for those who *do* have hope in the resurrection, for those whose **heavenly Father knows that** [they] **need all these things**. To worry about our physical welfare and our clothing is the mark of a worldly mind, whether Christian or not. When we think like the world and crave like the world, we will worry like the world, because a mind that is not centered on God is a mind that has cause to worry. The faithful, trusting, and reasonable Christian is “anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving [lets his] requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6). He refuses in anyway to “be conformed to this world” (Rom. 12:2).

Within this series of rebukes Jesus gives a positive command coupled with a beautiful promise: **But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you**. The cause of worry is seeking the things of this world, and the cause of contentment is seeking the things of God’s **kingdom and His righteousness**...

Out of all the options that we have, out of all the things we can seek for and be occupied with, we are to **seek first** the things of the One to whom we belong. That is the Christian’s priority of priorities, a divine priority composed of two parts: God’s **kingdom and God’s righteousness**.

As we have seen in the discussion of the Disciples’ Prayer (6:10), *basileia* (**kingdom**) does not refer to a geographical territory but to a dominion or rule. God’s kingdom is God’s sovereign rule, and therefore to **seek first His kingdom** is to seek first His rule, His will and His authority. Seeking God’s **kingdom** is losing ourselves in obedience to the Lord to the extent that we can say with Paul, “I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, in order that I may finish my course, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24). To seek first God’s kingdom is to pour out our lives in the eternal work of our heavenly Father.

To seek God’s kingdom is seek to win people into that kingdom, that they might be saved and God might be glorified. It is to have our heavenly Father’s own truth, love, and righteousness manifest in our lives, and to have “peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17). We also seek God’s kingdom when we yearn for the return of the King in His millennial glory to establish His kingdom on earth and usher in His eternal kingdom.

We are also to **seek ... His righteousness**. Instead of longing after the things of this world, we are to hunger and thirst for the things of the world to come, which are characterized above all else by God’s perfect **righteousness** and holiness. It is more than longing for something ethereal and future; it is also longing for something present and practical. We not only are to have heavenly expectations but holy lives (see Col. 3:2–3). “Since all these things [the earth and its works, v. 10] are to be destroyed in this way,” Peter says, “what sort of people ought you to

be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God" (2 Pet. 3:11).

Conclusion: Worry Is _____ Because of Our Future (6:34)

Making reasonable provisions for tomorrow is sensible, but to **be anxious for tomorrow** is foolish and unfaithful. God is the God of tomorrow as well as the God of today and of eternity. "The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Thy faithfulness" (Lam. 3:22–23).

It seems some people are so committed to worrying that, if they cannot find anything in the present to worry about, they think about possible problems in the future. **Tomorrow will take care of itself**, Jesus assures us. That is not the careless philosophy of the hedonist who lives only for his present enjoyment. It is the conviction of the child of God who knows that **tomorrow will take care of itself** because it is in his heavenly Father's hands.

That **each day has enough trouble of its own** is not a call to worry about that trouble, but to concentrate on meeting the temptations, trials, opportunities, and struggles we have today, relying on our Father to protect and provide as we have need. There is enough trouble in each day without adding the distress of worry to it.

God promises His grace for tomorrow and for every day thereafter and through eternity. But He does not **give** us grace for tomorrow now. He only gives His grace a day at a time as it is needed, not as it may be anticipated. "The steadfast of mind Thou wilt keep in perfect peace," Isaiah says, "because he trusts in Thee. Trust in the Lord forever, for in God the Lord, we have an everlasting Rock" (Isa. 26:3–4).

Appendix: Answer Guide

Lesson 19 (5-12-24)

Christian Influence: Salt and Light (Matthew 5:13-16)

A. There is a fundamental difference between Christians and non-Christians, between the church and the world

B. We must accept the responsibility which this distinction puts upon us

C. We must see our Christian responsibility as twofold

Lesson 20 (5-19-24)

Jesus on Righteousness (Matthew 5:17-20)

Christ and the Law (vv. 17, 18)

The Christian and the Law (vv. 19, 20)

Lesson 21 (6-2-24)

Christian Righteousness: Avoiding Anger and Lust (Matthew 5:21-30)

1. Avoiding anger (5:21–26)

2. Avoiding lust (5:27–30)

Lesson 22 (6-9-24)

Divorce and Remarriage (Matthew 5:31-32)

The Teaching of the Scribes and Pharisees (5:31)

The Teaching of the Old Testament

The Teaching of Jesus (5:31-32)

Lesson 23 (6-16-24)

To Tell the Truth (Matthew 5:33-37)

The Nature and Use of Oaths (5:33)

The Abuse of Oaths (5:33–36)

What God's Oaths Reveal

What Our Oaths Reveal

Lesson 24 (6-23-24)

Christian Righteousness: Non-retaliation and Active Love (Matthew 5:38-48)

1. Passive non-retaliation (5:38–42)

2. Active love (5:43–47)

Lesson 25 (6-30-24)

Holy One or Hypocrite? (Matthew 6:1-8, 16-18)

Giving to the Poor with the Right Motives (6:1-4)

Praying with the Right Motives (6:5-8)

Fasting with the Right Motives (6:16-18)

Lesson 26 (7-7-24)

How to Pray (Matthew 6:9-15)

Lesson 27 (7-14-24)

Treasures in Heaven (Matthew 6:19-24)

Two Treasures (6:19-21)

Two Visions (6:22-23)

Two Masters (6:24)

Lesson 28 (7-21-24)

Overcoming Worry (Matthew 6:25-34)

Worry Is Unfaithful Because of Our Master (6:25)

Worry Is Unnecessary Because of Our Father (6:26-30)

Worry Is Unreasonable Because of Our Faith (6:31-33)

Conclusion: Worry Is Unwise Because of Our Future (6:34)

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