

# LIVING LIFE AS CHRIST TAUGHT IT

A Study of the Sermon on the  
Mount

Matthew 5 – 7

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## INTRODUCTION

The Bible is the most significant and important piece of literature in all the ages of man. More copies of the Bible have been sold and distributed throughout the world than any one other book, and I think it is safe to say that it has been translated into more tongues and languages than any other book in history. The Christian begins with the presupposition that the Bible is the voice of God speaking to man. It is the Word of God, written, through which we come to know the Living Word, Jesus Christ.

Since we believe the entire Bible is inspired of God, therefore, the entire Bible is important. However, it is obvious that some parts of the Bible are more important than others because these parts bring the revelation of God into much sharper focus. For instance, the Gospel of John is much more significant to the believer than the Song of Solomon. This is not to say that we can pick and choose what we will believe and obey in the Word. We are committed to faith and obedience to all that God has revealed of Himself.

If I were to choose one part of the Bible which stands out as the most important and significant of all, I would naturally seek out that which gives the best and clearest picture of Jesus Christ. I would seek for those passages which tell us who He is and what He has done for our salvation. This would lead me naturally to the stories of His birth, His death and resurrection. Equally important, or at least nearly so, would be the accounts which tell us what He taught.

This brings us to what is commonly called the Sermon on the Mount, found in the Gospel of Matthew, chapters 5-7, in its most complete form. This is the most comprehensive and yet the most concise summary of all His teaching ministry. In this great sermon we have the definition and description of a Christian given to us by the founder of Christianity Himself, Jesus Christ. What could be more important for a Christian? What could be more accurate?

Unfortunately, this grand sermon has often been the victim of superficial interpretation and over-simplification which robs it of any relevance. For instance, how many times have you heard one say, when confronted with the claims of Christian discipleship, "O my religion is the Sermon on the Mount." This is usually said without any earthly idea of what the Sermon on the Mount is all about. Perhaps there is a vague recollection that it contains what we commonly refer to as the "Golden Rule", but that is about as deep as it goes. The person who truly has the Sermon on the Mount as "his religion" is a committed, fervent, humble Christian, who has truly been born again of the Spirit of God. Nothing less satisfies the requirements of this sermon.

Most of the interpretations of this sermon I have read treat it in a very shallow, humanistic manner, which relegates it to the realm of the so-called "Social Gospel". This is very unfortunate since it leaves the impression with many that this sermon deals only with ethics and morals. It does, of course, deal with the ethical and moral concerns of life, but only as a part of the basic relationship of the believer to his heavenly father, and only as these concerns relate to the Christian life as a whole.

There are several striking characteristics about this sermon we need to keep in mind as we attempt to study and understand it. First of all, there is the interrelationship of each part to the whole. It all ties together in such a way that each succeeding part grows out of what is said before and leads in to what is said afterwards. There is orderliness to this sermon we simply must understand if we are to understand it at all. There is a logical progression of thought which must be followed if we are to walk the pathway of truth through this sermon.

There are several dominant themes which emerge, and reappear throughout. Being a Christian is a drastically transforming experience and a revolutionary way of life. The life of the believer is as different from the man of the world as night from day. Being a Christian means that God is our heavenly Father, with all the many implications of that relationship. Being a Christian is to live the life of a pilgrim, being a "stranger and a sojourner" on this earth. Being a Christian is to submit one's self constantly to the judgment of God with a final rendezvous with judgment in mind. As we study this sermon, we shall discover how it relates to these themes in whole and in each part.

One final word of introduction. We are told in the Bible that the natural mind cannot comprehend spiritual things. We must have more than human teachers if we are to understand and live by the Word of God. We must have the help and counsel of the Holy Spirit. Christ said, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." This promise we will claim by faith and through prayer as we study the Sermon on the Mount which tells us how to live the Christian life, as Christ taught it.

## **RESOURCES AND METHODS FOR STUDYING THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT**

As you begin to study the Sermon on the Mount, which teaches us to live as Christ taught us, allow me to offer these suggestions. First, read through this section, Matthew 5-7, several times. Try to read it through each time without an interruption. That is quite a chore, especially if you are a busy housewife or trying to do so at your lunch hour. Read several different translations if you like, but any one of the several good ones will do. Try in this type of survey reading to grasp the general ideas and major divisions, which are rather obvious. One of the most difficult of all things is to discipline yourself to read this free of preconceived ideas of what the passage says, or in your mind, should say.

The next step is to get a good cross reference Bible and begin slowly, methodically, and in detail to study each verse and paragraph. Remember that the best interpreter of Scripture is Scripture. By reading the cross references suggested, you will begin to see that the Sermon on the Mount is first of all an exposition of Old Testament scripture. This surprises some people who have been conditioned to think everything Christ said was a new idea. In fact, it is rather embarrassing to those who insist this to discover nothing could be further from the truth. Many spare themselves this embarrassment by never bothering to really study and think through what Christ taught for themselves.

You will begin to discover that some commentary on Scripture will be very helpful at this point. Eerdmans Commentary on the New Testament is good, but too brief for really in depth study of this sermon. Barkley is also good and maybe the best available. Frankly, I was rather disappointed in the Interpreter's Bible which has received so much praise and publicity. It is very good in spots, but spotty goodness is not good enough in trying to understand Scriptures. Use your commentary to study through the Sermon on the Mount and then the other passages of Scripture which are suggested in cross reference.

As indicated in the introduction, there seems to be a scarcity of good books on this great sermon. However, this does not imply there are no good ones. There is one standard work in the field which towers head and shoulders above anything else written on the subject, either in recent years or dating back for many generations. I refer to the work of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, entitled Studies in the Sermon on the Mount. One simply cannot claim to have seriously studied Christ's sermon unless he has studied Dr. Lloyd-Jones' monumental work. Having studied this work, anyone who writes or speaks on this subject will be influenced by what he has learned from Dr. Lloyd-Jones. I acknowledge my debt to him without apology. He comes as near telling us exactly what Christ meant (and in such great detail) as is humanly possible. There are others who have written well on this-subject, including the great Stanley Jones, but none equal or exceed Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. The Christian world owes an enormous debt to Dr. Lloyd-Jones for opening up the meaning of Christ's sermon.

## **Suggested Resources**

*New Bible Commentary*, Eerdmans, 1984.

*Matthew Henry's Commentary*, Matthew Henry, Zondervan, 1999.

*Matthew*, William Hendriksen, Baker, 1973.

*Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Eerdmans, 1990.

*The World Upside Down or Right Side Up?* Paul Bretscher, Concordia, 1964.

## **CHRIST'S DEFINITION AND DESCRIPTION OF A CHRISTIAN**

### **MATTHEW 5:1-6**

The Sermon on the Mount begins with a thorough and complete definition and description of a Christian. Keep in mind that this comes from no less authority than Jesus Christ, the founder of the Christian faith. This first part of the Sermon on the Mount is commonly called the "Beatitudes." Quite simply we are talking about Christian attitudes at this point. The beginnings of Christianity are always found in what a person is rather than what he does. These verses deal with just that, what a Christian is. The Beatitudes are the foundation stones for all the rest of this great sermon. None of it really makes sense if you skip this beginning. There is really no point in talking about what a Christian does until you have defined who he is.

This definition is sorely needed in our day. Error in definition comes at two points. First, there are those extreme legalists who would reduce Christianity to a list of do's and don'ts, thou shalt and thou shalt nots. This is a tragic misrepresentation of the Christian faith, and undoubtedly many have been turned away from faith in Christ because of this sort of legalistic negativism. If this is all there is to Christianity, then we do not need Jesus Christ. We can make up a rather long and imposing list of taboos in the name of any one. Any time you begin to describe a Christian as one who does not drink, or who does not smoke, or who does not attend movies or any such thing, then you have missed the point entirely. Of course there is a place to discuss and decide what things a Christian should or should not do, but never in the context of definition.

There is another dangerous form of error in the matter of definition. This is just the opposite of the legalistic negativism. This form of error would attempt to define a Christian simply in terms of what one believes with little or no reference to his life and conduct. This sort of heresy has been with the church from the very beginning in one form or another, and with various names. In the days of Paul there were those who said, "If salvation is by faith alone, then let us sin the more that grace may the more abound." Paul rightly exposed this mind set as being opposed to the Christian faith. This line of thought would equate freedom from the curse of the law with freedom from the requirements of the law. In our day this takes the form of situational ethics or the new morality. This too stands condemned by the Word of God.

In rejecting both extremes, the Christian turns to the words of Jesus Christ which give to us a full and balanced definition of a Christian. Before we actually begin to attempt an analysis of this definition, let us keep several things in mind. First of all, the picture of the Christian man we see emerging in these words is obviously something which man cannot produce in and of himself. Nothing is more obvious than the truth that the new birth by the Spirit of God is an absolute necessity. Apart from this, there is no possibility of any man ever being a Christian.

Here we have a definition of all Christians. The Bible knows of no class distinctions in the Kingdom of God (a fact we should constantly keep in mind in our dealings with other" people). There are those who would divide Christians into two classes, regular Christians and saints, or as some say, real Christians. This is foreign to the teachings of our Lord and any other part of the Bible. Either this definition is for all believers or for none. Another principle to keep in mind is that all of these qualities mentioned in the Beatitudes are meant for all Christians. You

might be tempted to pick and choose and excuse yourself at certain points. For instance you might say, "I may be able to be a peace maker, but I'll have to leave the meekness to others." That's no good at all. To be sure, some Christians may possess more of certain virtues than others, or to a greater degree, but all of these descriptive phrases apply to all believers.

Each one of these spiritual attitudes carries with it a promise of blessing. This is a very exclusive thing. Only those who mourn as Christ meant it can be comforted. Only the meek can inherit the earth, etc. Like love and marriage, the requirement and the blessing go together. It cannot be otherwise.

The first word, "blessed", is a very key word to understanding the message of the Beatitudes. What does it mean in this context? Really there is no simple easy way to explain this term as Jesus used it. I think that the several modern translations of the Bible which attempt to translate this word to make it read "happy" are off the mark. That is much too shallow and superficial. The word "blessed, as Jesus used it, carries with it the idea of an eternal relationship with God. It means that one is under the favor of God and in a right relationship with Him. It speaks of contentment and fulfillment in the inner man. Keep these things in mind as we proceed.

1. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Who are the poor in spirit and why does the Kingdom of Heaven belong to them? This is not only the first step in defining a Christian, but the first step in becoming one. Let us first of all notice what this does not say. It does not say, "Blessed are the poor." Ever so often you will hear someone who speaks as if it were a blessing to be poor or that the poor deserve the blessing of God simply because they are poor. Since we could become so hopelessly entangled in something that is completely aside from the point, we will move on. Neither does this say, "Blessed are the poor mouth", nor "Blessed are the depressed and nervous." The Lord did say, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," and this has a very particular meaning. We go back to the 6th chapter of Isaiah to discover something of what this means. Isaiah has just seen a vision of the majestic holiness of God in all His splendor, and as a result, he truly sees himself for the first time. Listen to the words of one poor in spirit: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." It was a completely shattering experience for him. He saw himself as a sinful man, one wholly deserving of God's wrath, and without hope except in His mercy. The one who is poor in spirit has seen himself in light of God's might and holiness, and pride and self-sufficiency are no more.

The blessing of such an experience is expressed in this promise, "For theirs is the kingdom of heaven." This experience is an absolute necessity for entrance in the Kingdom. Human pride and self-righteousness must be obliterated. We enter the Kingdom singing, "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling." We will never begin our trek back to the Father's house until, like the prodigal, we come to ourselves, awaken to our lostness and decry our estrangement.

You see, the first step toward the Kingdom is realizing and confessing that you are in fact outside the Kingdom. The Kingdom is entered only by those whose pride has been broken and who have humbled themselves before God.

2. "Blessed are they that mourn for they shall be comforted." This is the natural sequence. Once you are aware of your spiritual poverty, a deep sense of sorrow and repentance wells up within you. How often this Beatitude is quoted out of context. It is almost universally read at funeral services, and it has absolutely nothing to do with the mourning caused by death. In fact, it is quite obvious that all who mourn are not comforted. Only as we see this in its proper context and sequence do we

understand the Lord's meaning. Once again we turn back to the pages of the Old Testament to gain insight into the meaning of these words.

The prophet Ezekiel writes of his nightmare-like experience of seeing the destruction of Jerusalem in a vision. It was a terrible thing for him to endure, but in this experience there was one thing which throws light on these words of our Lord. Before the judgment fell upon the Holy City and before the destroying angel was unleashed, a messenger from God went through the city putting a mark upon the forehead of those who mourned and sighed for sin. When judgment fell, these alone were spared.

This is basically a call to heartfelt, sincere repentance. Jesus said at one time, "Except you repent you shall likewise perish." His public ministry began with this call, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The one who mourns in this sense is heir to the promise of divine comfort. The comfort promised is forgiveness and acceptance from God the Father. This is abiding comfort that endures all the cares and trials and sorrows of life. Once you are assured that God is your Father, that you have been adopted into His family, and pardoned for your sins, you have the comfort promised by our Lord.

3. "Blessed are the meek, for the meek shall inherit the earth." Having seen myself in the light of God's holiness and truth, and mourning deeply and repenting before Him in sincerity, my pride and vanity, my haughty disdain for others is transformed into gentle meekness. And what is meekness? Meekness is basically a matter of self being brought under the controlling, loving yoke of Jesus Christ. He said, "...take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly of heart..." What is meekness? It is Jesus taking the little children in His arms and blessing them. It is Jesus talking with concern and compassion to the woman at the well. What is meekness? It is Jesus girding Himself with a towel and washing the feet of His disciples while they were arguing about who should be greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. While the servants battled for prestige and position, their Lord and Master washed their feet. "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus."

What is meekness? It is not weakness. It is strength under the control of the Master, harnessed to do His will. As a little boy one of my most exciting times was early in the spring when Father hired a farmer to come to our house and plow up the garden for spring planting. I used to sit on the back fence and watch those powerful animals easily pull a plow that I could not even lift. Their muscles rippled under their satin-like flanks, lathered in sweat. One day the kindly farmer turned to me and said, "Hey, boy, come on down here and drive the team for me while I guide the plow." There I was in all my nine year old glory, proudly guiding and controlling two powerful beasts who were many, many times in my own strength. They were meek but they were not weak.

The promise is almost startling. "For they shall inherit the earth." Oh no, that cannot be, anyone can see that the strong and the forceful inherit the earth, or do they? What did the Lord have in mind when He promised this? Surely he could see it was the proud Roman, not the meek believer, who inherited the earth. This promise speaks of something much richer and grander than conquest of territory. It speaks of an attitude and quality of life that enables one to be content and grateful. It is a promise of inner peace and abiding satisfaction. Perhaps some of you remember the often quoted prayer that says, "I asked for all things that I might enjoy life, but I was given life that I might enjoy all things." For the Christian, however, there is an even deeper meaning than this. We are promised a new creation when Christ shall have finished His glorious plan and restored all things. This too will be our inheritance.

4. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled." Once again we look at the ascending order of these words. Because we have

become poor in spirit, recognizing our guilt and estrangement from God, therefore we mourn in true and deep contrition and repentance, and our attitude toward ourselves and toward others undergoes a change. However, this still leaves us far short. We begin to desire to be more than we are. We hunger and thirst after righteousness. This means we begin to hate the sins which once we cherished and cultivated. We begin to take seriously the words of Christ, "If any man would be my disciple, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." There is a powerful negative in the Christian life. There is a place for "no." But righteousness is more than just an absence of sin. Righteousness is a positive relation to God, and a positive inner experience.

Notice the words, "hunger and thirst." These are strong words. They speak of one who is desperate. Not the casual appetite that comes because it has been an hour or so since last you ate but the driving, maddening hunger of one who is near starvation and must have food to live. Not the casual thirst of seeing a fountain and being reminded that you have not had your quota of water for the day, but the thirst of a man stranded in the burning sands of the desert whose life depends upon water, and quickly. I think this is the sense in which we must hunger and thirst after righteousness if we are to be filled. It must take first place. You must hunger and thirst enough to do something about it. Only then can we claim the promise that we shall be filled. Righteousness comes only to those who pay the price, who diligently search, who desperately hunger and thirst.

Having come this far, we arrive at something of a break, a subtle change in direction. The first four Beatitudes are concerned primarily (though not exclusively) with our relationship to God, and the rest deal primarily with our relationship to the world and our fellow man. This is a good time to stop and reflect for just a moment on the implied warnings involved in these Beatitudes. These promised blessings can come only to those who meet the demands. When we say, "Blessed are the poor in spirit", we are thereby implying, "Cursed are the proud and self-sufficient, for they shall never know the Kingdom of Heaven." This same implication carries right on through all these words of Jesus. We might not like the implication and choose to ignore it, but it is there and we really need to face it.

### **FOR FURTHER STUDY**

1. Look up and read the portions of the Sermon on the Mount which Mark and Luke record.
2. Note how the different ways of saying the same thing serve to bring out the truth more clearly. Luke 6:20-49 and Mark 4:21-23.
3. Does Christ's definition of a Christian invalidate Acts 16:31 ?
4. Note verse 32 (Acts 16).
5. Would this suggest a more complete explanation of verse 31 ?
6. Does this definition rule out growth and development within the Christian life?
7. Think through the word "blessed". Try to develop the idea of blessedness more fully.
8. Read Isaiah 6:5 and Luke 5:8. Does this explain "poor in spirit"?
9. What are some marks of one who really "hungers and thirsts" for goodness?



## **CHRIST'S DEFINITION AND DESCRIPTION OF A CHRISTIAN CONTINUED**

### **MATTHEW 5:7-9**

We have already come far enough along in our study to understand that the things we have been talking about come into our lives by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. These are not natural human achievements, they are gifts. Yet we must keep in mind that they are gifts to be cultivated and put to work. This is part of what is involved in the biblical injunction to "make our calling and election sure."

5. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." Notice how absolutely necessary it is to follow the Lord's logical order in these things. No one could ever become a truly merciful person until he has first been broken and humbled before God, changed in his attitudes toward others, and been made to long for true righteousness.

Even as mercy is the foundation stone upon which our relationship to God rests, so it is also the beginning point for all proper relationships toward our fellow man. Unless we are at heart merciful toward others, even as God has been merciful toward us, then we are not being what God has called us to be, and we can never have the kind of relationship with others which the Christian faith demands. This virtue must begin at home. Is it too much to say it is needed there more than any other place? Surely, if the home is the most basic of all social institutions, and it is, then it is the one place above all others in which we need to be merciful. How many broken homes would have been spared if only this Beatitude had been remembered and put to work!

Who is the merciful person? The one who is merciful in attitudes, words, and actions toward others. The one who "Thinks no evil, rejoices not in iniquity..." As a result of having received the mercy of God, I find myself a debtor to all men to be merciful. Put another way, if I consistently refuse to be a merciful person, it is because I have never realized my need of God's mercy and have therefore never received it. This is the plain but awful truth of the matter. If I bring the Word of God to bear on my life at this point and discover that I have failed in this most important area, then I must repent immediately and begin to become a merciful person. I have no choice in the matter. There is no option. A Christian is one who is truly merciful, which means he both receives and gives mercy. And the giving and receiving are so inextricably entwined according to Jesus that one is impossible without the other.

6. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." Right away we must understand that this term, "pure in heart", takes a good deal of explaining or else we will miss the point. Purity in this sense is not primarily purity as we usually think of it; i.e., freedom from sexual sins, though that is a part of it. Purity, as it is used here, could best be explained in terms of metals. We speak of something being pure gold or pure silver. This is a figure of speech to imply wholeness. Pure gold is gold that is unalloyed by a lesser metal. Purity in this sense means undiluted. We like to think that our morning orange juice is undiluted by water, that it is pure orange juice.

Now when we begin to apply this sort of thing to a person, we mean to imply that a person is not double hearted, or not a hypocrite, that he has one goal, one

purpose, and one frame of heart. This person seeks above all else the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and is not easily turned aside to lesser things.

We must not leave out the idea of inner purity as we commonly conceive of it. The pure in heart is just that. He has been cleansed inwardly by the power of God. He has been purged by the process described before, beginning with becoming poor in spirit. The poor in spirit progress on to become pure in heart. The idea of the "heart" simply refers to the inner person, the real you.

The promise held out to the pure in heart is one of the most exciting, thrilling, satisfying experiences offered to man. Ultimately it will have its fulfillment when we enter "Our Father's house of many mansions", but before then it offers a very real and wonderful experience to believers. This is not a promise of some psychic vision, whereby we actually behold some physical manifestation of God. What is it to see God in this sense? It is to understand, to comprehend something of God's presence and of His will. It is to experience the joy of fellowship with Him, and the comfort of His mercy. The disciples "saw God" in Jesus Christ. Judas, who betrayed Him, saw Him physically for three years but he never did see Him, not really. He failed to discover that God was in Christ. Why? Because he was not pure in heart. He was not undiluted or unalloyed in his affection for the Lord. Money, and the love of money, began to crowd out love for Jesus, until at last money became his god and he betrayed God for god.

7. "Blessed are the peace makers, for they shall be called sons of God." Once again we come to these words spoken by Jesus Christ, and realize almost at once that they are misconstrued, misinterpreted and made to say things He never intended. The real tragedy of this is that what He did intend was so infinitely more important. Blessed are the peace makers! How often we hear these words. They are the next logical step in the definition and description of a Christian we have been considering. Having become poor in spirit, and continuing through the experiences of the Beatitudes in turn, the believer is now to become an agent for reconciliation.

Before we delve into this shall we not first "clear the air" by saying what a peacemaker is not? Surely he is not one who simply mouths platitudes about peace. He is not a compromiser with evil or an appeaser of the aggressor. He does not ignore strife and war, and alienation from God. To ignore these things makes of one an ignorant person. No, the peace maker, as Jesus intended, is none of these things.

Blessed are those whose message cries out to all, "Be reconciled to God." The peacemaker is one who, having passed through the ascending order of the Beatitudes now begins to point others to the way in which they may find the peace of God. It is not only what he says, or even mostly what he says, but his whole life bears witness to the truth of what Jesus taught. He is in short a Christian as Jesus described a Christian, and thus as a result he is naturally a witness to others. This is a part of the Christian experience. It is a vital and necessary part of being a Christian. It is a part of Jesus' definition of a Christian. No Christian is exempt from the role of the peace maker.

At this point you may be a bit uncomfortable because I have failed to mention reconciliation of man to man. We have been so conditioned by much of what is said and written today that for most reconciliation is primarily a matter of people learning to tolerate each other and get along reasonably well. Well, of course, the Christian is called upon to be an agent of reconciliation of man to man, but never just that, and never that alone. In fact, he understands that sort of reconciliation is not possible to begin with. We must not allow ourselves to be pressured out of the role that Christ gave to us simply to satisfy the latest ecclesiastical fad. By all means the Christian is called upon to be a peace maker, but he must always begin with the truth that men are reconciled to each other only as they are reconciled to God. Any

testimony or witness that calls upon men to be reconciled to each other only is not a distinctive Christian witness. Having said that, however, we recognize that a part of our being reconciled to God is also being reconciled to each other. Jesus made this abundantly clear in another place when he said if we have a gift to bring to the altar of God, and remember that we have something against our brother, we are first to go and be reconciled to our brother, and then return with our gift.

The promised blessing to the peace maker is that we shall be called the children of God. Why that? It is because God is the prime reconciler, and as His children, we are called upon to be like our heavenly Father. As we become peace makers, we become more and more like our Lord who made peace between God and man, and where His gospel is taken seriously, between man and man. If you accept this role which Christ demands of His followers, then you validate your relationship and your sonship to God.

### **FOR FURTHER STUDY**

1. Define mercy in your own words.
2. How can we be "pure in heart" when the whole trend of the times is against us? List your suggestions and make them practical.
3. Read Isaiah 2:3, 5 and Ephesians 2. How might these passages shed light on the concept of the "peace maker"?
4. Think through the role of peace maker in the biblical sense of the term. What opportunities do you have to be a peace maker?
5. Why is purity of heart necessary in order that one might see God? References: Psalm 66:18, Hebrews 12:14, Habakkuk 1:13 a, and I John 3:3.



## **THE NATURAL REACTION TO A CHRISTIAN**

### **MATTHEW 5:10-12**

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." By setting this Beatitude apart, I do not mean to imply that it is not related to the others. It is. It is a part of Christ's definition of a Christian, but at the same time, there is something different about this one. Although it is a proper part of the definition of a Christian, it reaches beyond this and points us to the next major division of this great sermon: the reaction of the world to the Christian and his effect upon this world. In this Beatitude we discover the connecting link.

All of the previous Beatitudes have been preparing us for this one. Christ has been saying to us, "This is what I require of my followers; this is what they are." As we study through these qualities, we might be tempted to think, if this description fits me, and if I am a Christian as Christ described one, then surely I will be recognized and honored. At least people will respect me for my faith and obvious commitment. Christ reads our minds before we can say a word, and tells that this is not the case at all; rather we must be prepared for and expect a rather hostile reaction to righteousness. Is this surprising to you? It should not be. In Jesus Christ we find righteousness and goodness incarnate and perfected, and He aroused intense hostility. He warned His disciples that if the Master is despised and persecuted His disciple can expect nothing less, or more.

How shall we understand this Beatitude? First of all, this is the only one on which the Lord really elaborated. He went right on to say, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." In this way Christ took this final Beatitude out of the realm of the theoretical and put it into the realm of personal experience for each one of His followers.

I think this must be one of the most often abused and misquoted passages in the entire Bible. Everyone who finds himself or herself persecuted, especially for a good cause, will claim this verse as a defense and as proof positive that he or she is righteous. There are some good people who are persecuted for a cause, but not necessarily for righteousness sake. There are some good Christian people who are not so much persecuted for being Christians as they are for being overbearing and obnoxious in their Christianity.

The first and most obvious truth that is brought out here is that the Christian will face persecution. Being a Christian does not mean that all men will think well of you, quite to the contrary. To a greater or lesser degree, at one time or another, the Christian will be faced with hostility and persecution. The Bible says that all who live godly lives will suffer persecution. For a long time the church, especially in this country, has enjoyed unprecedented prosperity and respectability. This has not always been so. It is not true in all places in the world today, and it will not continue indefinitely even here. Perhaps this very respectability and prosperity partly account for the loss of real influence and power the church has suffered. We are beginning to awaken to the fact that even though we have become morally and spiritually weak and flabby, still if ever the church attempts to be Christ's church; it is going to suffer persecution and intense pressure. The world tries to mold Christians after its own image rather than after the image of Christ.

Christ not only told us that the Christian would suffer persecution, but went on to promise the greatest of blessings upon those who are so persecuted. This Beatitude suggests that basically the persecution He refers to will be in the form of being reviled, which in turn suggests being openly snubbed, rejected, insulted and sneered at. Many of you have known such things. His next word about this persecution is persecution itself. This suggests outward hostility, even physical violence, being harassed and prevented from living an open, free life. Finally, He said that we would have all manner of evil spoken against us, falsely. The early Christians in Rome were accused of cannibalism, sexual immorality, murder, blasphemy, and of all things, of being atheists. Jesus' warning that those who persecuted Christians would think they were doing God a service was literally fulfilled.

Before we can proceed further we must clarify what He meant by the expression, "for righteousness sake." Remember that we are bound by certain principles of interpretation in this as in all passages of the Bible. If we make the Bible say what we want it to say, we will not hear the voice of God speaking to us. If we attempt to define righteousness rather than accepting Jesus' definition of righteousness, then we are in error.

This does not say, "Blessed are they who are persecuted," period. There is nothing blessed in persecution per se. There is nothing thrilling and noble about being reviled and defamed. It is hateful and hard to endure at best. Christ did not say, "Blessed are the gullible who are taken advantage of by smarter people." He did not even say, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for standing up for a cause." The difference may be subtle, but it is very important. We are called upon as Christians to join all sorts of causes, revolutions and rebellions, and all in the name of Christ, supposedly. The Christian may well have certain political and social convictions for which he must stand and for which he will be persecuted, but this particular promise of Christ does not belong to him for doing so. The blessing promised is for those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, and He has just finished describing righteousness as being poor in spirit, meek, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, merciful, etc. In other words, righteousness is being like Jesus Christ, and if you are like Him, you are going to be persecuted for it. The genuine Christian life remains a puzzle to most people, even as the life of Christ Himself bewildered the scribes and the Pharisees, and even at times bewildered His disciples. You will remember that bewilderment soon turned to hostility and hatred, and in the end, the religious leaders betrayed Him to the Romans and had Him executed. Let me say in passing that the Christian will discover that much of the persecution and hostility he faces will come from within the church. You see, when a person truly lives life as Christ taught it, that person stands out in sharp contrast to the "nominal Christian". This brings conviction and often resentment and hatred.

Of course, the real question is not, "Will I be persecuted for righteousness sake?", but "How will I face and accept this persecution?"

Your reaction to persecution for the sake of Jesus is one of the most crucial tests, as well as conclusive proofs of your true nature, and spiritual condition. What should be the Christian's reaction? Christ said, "Rejoice and be glad." That's quite an order. It seems as if it would be enough just to grit our teeth and clench our fists and endure it, but that is not enough. By all means, persecution for the sake of Jesus must not lead us to retaliate, or even want to. Do not let inner resentment against persecution rob you of the promised blessing.

If you want to know what Jesus meant, look at the reaction of the early disciples to persecution. In the Book of Acts, when persecution first began to break out, Christians gave thanks because they were counted worthy to suffer for Jesus' sake.

Stephen looked unto Jesus and was given grace to rejoice at the moment of his death, and also to pray for forgiveness for those who murdered him. Paul and Silas, after being cruelly and unjustly beaten sang songs of praise in the Philippian jail at midnight. At one point Paul said, "Most gladly will I suffer persecution for the Lord's sake." You see, there was no plotting to get even, no righteous wrath, no resentment even toward those doing the persecution. Instead there was rejoicing and exceeding gladness.

Why should we rejoice in the face of persecution? Let it first be said that it really does take a Christian, as Christ defined one, to do this. The Christian rejoices in persecution because it serves to assure one that he is indeed a Christian. To be given tangible proof that you are a child of God, that your name is written in heaven, that your life is well pleasing to God is something about which you should rejoice! It is a marvelous thing and brings inner peace and joy. My own limited experience with this came at a most unexpected time. I was speaking for an important (to me) truth on the floor of Presbytery. It was not a popular cause, and there was much hostility in the air. When I stood to speak, it was with much fear and literal trembling, but just then a forgotten fragment of a verse from the Bible rang like a clear bell in my mind. "The Lord stood by me and strengthened me." Suddenly He was there and the joy of His presence reduced my tension to insignificance. Who can be afraid when you have this assurance? Who can be depressed or even cast down?

Again we are to rejoice and be exceeding glad because this places us in special company with Jesus Christ. We come to know the "fellowship of His suffering". It means that your life is having the same effect upon the world that Jesus' life had. It means that He is being seen through you. Is not this something to rejoice and to be glad about?

However, the reason Christ gave to us why we should rejoice and be exceeding glad when we are persecuted for righteousness' sake is found in these words, "For great is your reward in heaven, for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you." Let us look first at the last part of that blessing. What He was saying is that when you are persecuted for righteousness sake, you are in the company of the prophets, the spokesmen for God. That alone is cause for great rejoicing. However, it is the lesser emphasis, the lesser blessing. "Great is your reward in heaven." This is the reason, and this is the reason it can apply only to the Christian, defined and described by Jesus Christ. Only those will ever enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The man of the world could not care less about rewards in heaven. Even in religious circles, if one can be high priest (or its several modern counterparts), why worry about heaven? The man of the world is concerned with rewards here and now, and feels that anyone who works primarily for rewards in heaven must be a fanatic, some sort of a nut. The idea of even thinking about rewards in heaven is termed "escapism" by many churchmen today. But this is the main point of the Christian life according to Jesus. When the disciples returned from their first successful "evangelistic campaign", rejoicing that even the demons were subject to their commands, Christ said to them, "Rather rejoice that your names are written in heaven." If Jesus thought that heavenly gain was to be preferred above earthly fame, who am I to set my sights on lesser things?

How foolish this makes us look, we all cling so ardently to things of this world. We all want so urgently to be approved and accepted by other people. We embrace death, sin and decay and ignore the riches of Christ's promised rewards. How sad! How utterly foolish! If only we would take Christ seriously, and really live as He taught us to live, then in spite of persecution and even because of it, we would rejoice and be exceeding glad, knowing our reward in heaven will be great.

### **FOR FURTHER STUDY**

1. List the various forms in which you may be persecuted for righteousness' sake.
2. When have you been the persecutor instead of persecuted?
3. Look up as many Biblical examples as you can find of those who were persecuted for righteousness' sake.
4. List instances when you were persecuted and describe your reaction. How did Christ react when He was persecuted?

## **THE CHRISTIAN'S FUNCTION**

### **MATTHEW 5:15**

We now must consider the functions and influences which Christ requires of His people. The first of these is to be found in the words of Jesus; "You are the salt of the earth; but if the 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."

Here we have the most direct and the clearest word on the function of a Christian in the world. We also find a word of solemn warning which we dare not ignore. Many Christians seem so unsure of the function they are to fulfill. They seem to think unless they are serving as an officer in the church, or a teacher in the church school, or filling some specific slot in the organizational machinery of the church, they are not fulfilling their role as a Christian. Hopefully, this blurred and fuzzy picture will come into sharper focus as we explore this text.

To whom was Jesus speaking when He said, "You are the salt of the earth"? He was speaking to those whose lives are described by the Beatitudes. Or to simplify it. He was speaking to Christians, to disciples, when He said, "You are the salt of the earth."

This has something to say about the nature and condition of the world. If we were to use the terminology of modern science to comment on the nature and condition of the world as Christ saw it, we would say that the world is a victim of the second law of thermo-dynamics. This means that the world is in an increasing state of decay and ruin. In the physical world we know this is true. The tendency in nature is toward disintegration and death. This is not only true of the material universe; it is also true of each one of us. From the day we are born we begin to die physically. However, it was not the physical world to which Jesus was referring. By the word "world" Jesus meant the world of people, with its organizations, its institutions, its governments and its whole social and cultural fabric. When Jesus said of Christians, "Ye are the salt of the earth," He was teaching us that this world of ours is in trouble, and indeed is a slave of death. Jesus taught that the world was moving toward destruction and (as we shall later see in this study) judgment.

The second implication about the nature of the world is this: The Christian cannot forever prevent the inevitable. Just as salt can only hinder for a while the process of decay, so the Christian cannot forever prevent the ruin of this world. That is a shattering thing to think about and realize. We are all so sure that one day the church will save the world that we will not even entertain a contrary notion. The Scriptures teach that the world will be brought to ruin and judgment and nothing can prevent it. Does this mean we are to give up, to sit back and wait for the end? Does this mean we should never lift a finger against evil or to help those in need? Of course not. That would be a denial of what Jesus has called us to be—the salt of the earth. But we do need to keep things in perspective, and to remember that this world is under the righteous judgment of God who, according to the New Testament writers, has already set a day in which He will judge the world. Is there no hope at all? Oh yes, there is a hope, a hope that is unfailling, that is steadfast and sure, but that is not in or of this world.

Using the figure of speech Jesus used, that of salt, we can begin to explore our function and to fulfill it. The first distinctive thing about salt is its essential saltiness. The taste of salt is distinct. In my seminary days this was brought home to me in a rather alarming way. (Seminary students are not little angels.) At breakfast one morning a group of us began sipping our coffee after carefully measuring out the right amount of sugar and cream, only to discover that some prankster had replaced all the sugar in the bowl with salt. Right away we could detect the presence of salt. It was very distinctive! Either by its absence or presence, salt makes itself known, and quickly, as being salt. The Christian's first calling is to be a Christian as Jesus defined the word.

The next, and in many ways the primary, function of salt is that it acts as a preservative against decay. Certainly in Jesus' day, and in His land, salt was the primary agent of food preservation, and as such it was very valuable and very important. Organized society depends in many ways upon salt and its preservative power. If this is true, and if the Christian is to be the salt of the earth, how does he exercise this preserving function? His very presence as an individual and as a part of the whole body of believers works in this way. The redeemed Christ-like life helps the society in which it lives by preventing it from becoming as bad as it would be otherwise. Just the presence and life of one Christian in a prisoner of war camp in Southeast Asia during World War II led to the transformation of the camp from a living hell into a livable comradeship of suffering and sharing. Abraham alone stood between God and Sodom in his intercession and God assured that great saint that the presence of ten good men in the wicked city would preserve it from ruin.

Now here is where we are apt to make a very serious mistake. We are prone to think that as Christians serving as the salt of the earth, we must immediately organize, promote causes, protest, march, lobby, legislate, etc. In fact, this is precisely what the church has done in our time. To what effect? Have we accomplished the end of poverty or the eradication of race prejudice? Have we solved the problems of divorce and broken homes, or any of the other serious social ills of our time? No, in fact we see all these things increasing almost directly in proportion to the effort we expend to solve them. When the church has really been successful in fulfilling its function and exerting influence in these mentioned areas has been in times of great spiritual awakening. The Reformation, which was at heart a great religious revival, also led to the improvement of society, the beginning of education on a broad scale, the liberalization of government, and even to such things as public sanitation. As a Christian is faithful to his own nature as a Christian, and as he fulfills Christ's requirements for discipleship, he also becomes effective and influential in his society.

Finally, salt is used to give flavor to food, and serves to make it more palatable to the taste. Life without Christ and without Christians is meaningless, tasteless and totally unsatisfying. We are all caught up in the mad rush of our times to amuse ourselves, to exhaust ourselves with recreation. This generation is bored to death. It has lost all sense of direction and purpose. In the early years of my ministry, I was involved in a counseling situation which still distresses me when I think of it. I was serving in a very economically depressed area of the Appalachian Mountains. Our people were very poor and uneducated. Some could neither read nor write, and more than one family lived in shacks with dirt floors. In that same community there lived another family several cuts above the average in every way. The man and his wife were college graduates, and ran an experimental farm for a large feed and seed company. The wife, a middle aged woman, had a serious drinking problem. She had no spiritual resources to draw upon. She had cut herself off from the church, and had neglected her relationship to the Lord in every way. There was nothing to build on; there was no point of reference I could use to help her. I tried to point her to the

Lord and suggested that a relationship with Jesus Christ would change her heart and her life. Over and over again I heard her say these words, "I am so empty, so empty." What she was saying was that life had no "flavor," no "taste." The Christian serves to bring this missing quality to life. "You are the salt of the earth."

There is more to this verse than just the injunction. There is also a warning and a rather severe one at that. "...if the 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." What could you do with salt that was no longer salty? It would have no preserving quality. It would add no taste to food. You really would be hard put to discover a use for it. In fact you would discard it as being totally useless. The implication is clear. The Christian who allows his essential nature as a Christian to be rendered ineffective is the most useless person on the face of the earth. If we are failing to fulfill our God-given function, what use are we? If we compromise away our distinctive Christian character, what have we gained? The respect of the world? Hardly! We have gained nothing but contempt from men, and have become useless in the cause of Christ on earth. We may still be "good" in our own eyes so far as becoming gross violators of the law, but our goodness is an illusion. In short, we become good for nothing.

We can now begin to see that it is vitally important for Christians to be Christians. It is important to the world in which we live, for without the presence and influence of the Christian, society and culture will soon surrender to moral and spiritual rot and decay.

Christ also illustrated the function of the Christian when He said, "You are the light of the world." When you understand this, you will see that it is one of the most remarkable and even startling things He ever said. On more than one occasion, Christ said of Himself, "I am the light of the world." He claimed this in a very exclusive sense. He said this as one who spoke with the authority of the living God. He spoke as a son in His father's name. Here is the amazing thing, now He shares that title with His disciples. This suggests a relationship and identity between the Lord and His own that is truly amazing. It also speaks of a trust that challenges the very best in any person. "I am the light of the world." "You are the light of the world." We can only bow our heads in awe and wonder, and say with a new understanding and appreciation, "Christ lives in me."

This word from Christ also speaks to us concerning our relationship to the world. It places us in a paradox. This tells us that we are in complete contrast to the world, and yet its only hope. This implies that the world is in darkness, that it is lost. The vast increase in knowledge and know-how only serves to emphasize the fact that morally and spiritually there is great darkness in the world and in the minds of men; in fact, there is utter chaos. The foundation stones upon which our civilization is built are trembling and seem unable to support the superstructure of our culture. The truth of Christ's first century challenge to His disciples is still very relevant to His twentieth century disciples. If anything, it is even more applicable today.

We begin with the straightforward statement, "You are the light of the world." That is a very bold statement, and if any other than Christ had said these words, they would be most presumptuous. However, the fact that He said them makes them of utmost importance. The world will more or less acknowledge that Jesus Christ is a light in the world, but it objects violently when He makes the exclusive claim for Himself and His people. The Roman government was perfectly willing to accept Jesus Christ as a God among the gods, but they would not tolerate the Christian claim that He alone was Lord.

What does it mean to say of the Christian, "You are the light of the world"? Once again at the risk of being repetitious and even tedious, we must hark back to Christ's definition of a Christian, or this claim makes no sense at all. Unless we have been born again, and unless the Holy Spirit is working within us then Christ is not living in us, and we are not the lights of the world.

The function of light is to expose darkness and things hidden by darkness. Many years ago I attended a demonstration sponsored by the Forestry Service of the U.S. Government. It was held in a large outdoor stadium during the intermission at an athletic contest. One of the demonstrations in the use of forest products involved matches. The lights were all turned out (it was a very dark night) and everyone was asked to be perfectly still. Then at a given word all who had matches were asked to light them. As the matches were lit by the hundreds all over the stadium, it was amazing how much could be seen by their dim light. Even the flickering light of a match was in sharp contrast to the darkness around us. This is what Christ did when He was on earth. The light of His life exposed the darkness in others, especially those who claimed to speak for God. So the life of the Christian exposes the darkness of the unregenerate heart. It is most vital to the salvation of the lost that they see this contrast, and that they see in the life of the believer the kind of light they need and long for.

But light does more than just expose darkness. It leads men out of darkness. Many a lost person has been guided to safety by a beam of light, a campfire in the wilderness, a lighthouse at sea. The Christian's life says to the world that there is a way out of the darkness. There is another way for men to live. The light of the true Christian life leads men to God. It reflects the light of Jesus Christ into the darkness of men's minds and hearts. A man walking down one of the side streets of a large city one day noticed a little boy with a mirror reflecting the light of the sun into a dark window of an upstairs apartment. When asked what he was doing, the lad replied that his little sister who was a victim of polio never got outdoors, and since her only window was away from the sun, her brother went out each day with his mirror to reflect the sunlight into her room for a few moments of association with joy. The windows of many a heart never could see the "sun" of the "Son" unless some loving Christian reflected it into their darkened lives.

Light serves to dispel fear. The darkness of fear is a dreadful thing, and the ultimate fear is the fear of death and judgment. All through the Bible we read again and again, "fear not." You will notice that this admonition was the first word of the angels to the shepherds when the birth of Jesus was announced. Just before Christ went to the cross, while in the upper room with the disciples, He said, "Let not your heart be troubled." When the fearful women came to the garden tomb in the early dawn hours and found the stone rolled away from the door, and the body of Jesus missing, the angel greeted them with, "Fear not." The perfect love of God casts out all fear. Written into the life of the Christian is the message of hope. By his presence and life the Christian proclaims the conquest of fear. In trouble and sorrow he testifies with quiet strong faith that God is good even in times of trouble. By His evident peace and hope, in the face of death, He proclaims to the fearful world, "Fear not." Thus, as the light of the world, we are used of the Lord to dispel fear.

Having made His statement, the Lord immediately presses home the importance of fulfilling this function. Jesus went on to say, "A city set on a hill cannot be hidden, 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." I detect an ironic subtle sense of humor in these words. Concealment is not the purpose for building a fair city in a high place, but rather the purpose is to display its beauty. How much more absurd it would be for a lamp to be lit in a house and then immediately covered over so that its light could

not shine. The lighted lamp that is hidden under a cover would be just as useless as one not lit at all.

Apparently, what the Lord was telling us is that it is quite possible for a Christian who possesses the truth of God and the life which Jesus Christ imparts to obscure the light. This is not only a possibility, it is a terrible tragedy. The Christian is the light of the world, the only light, and if our light does not shine, how great is the world's darkness. What a waste it is when the only people who truly know God, who alone can show the meaning of His love, fail to let this light shine before men.

There is a danger involved in this. If we fail to let our light shine, if we consistently and habitually allow our light to be obscured, we may well question our basic relationship to the Lord. Are we truly His or are we hypocrites, posing as believers in Jesus Christ? We must realize that the one purpose of our lives is to let our lights shine. The further we go in our study the more we realize that being a Christian and living as Jesus taught us is a very drastic and complete affair. We cannot be half-hearted and nominal in our commitment. Our spiritual forefathers understood this when they wrote into the Shorter Catechism these words, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever."

Christ said, "...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." The key word is "so." We are to let our light shine, but in such a way that the attention will not be so much on us when men see our good works, but rather that their attention might turn toward our heavenly Father. Our purpose is never that we might be praised, but that God may be glorified through us. Have you ever thought how much more good could be accomplished for the Lord if no one cared who received the credit for it? The greatest witness that may be borne for Christ, the surest word of testimony, is to be found in living a constant and consistent Christian life, according to the teachings of Christ.

One final word about the essentials in keeping the light burning. Jesus alluded to these two essentials in other passages in the Gospels. He told us to keep our lamps trimmed, and be sure we have oil always at hand. It would seem that the trimming of the wick would refer to self-discipline. In this we constantly examine ourselves in the light of God's Word, being crucified with Christ in general and in particular. We need to keep constantly vigilant to make sure that we do not hinder the light of Christ shining through us. In His parable of the ten virgins, Christ warned us against not having oil in our lamps. The fuel that feeds the light of the Christian is personal fellowship with the Lord through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. There is a sense in which once we have received the Holy Spirit, He is ours forever, and yet Paul reminded the early Christians of their responsibility toward that Presence when he said, "Quench not the Holy Spirit," and again, "Grieve not the Spirit." We must keep our avenues of communication open with the Lord, lest the oil in our lamps fail us just at the crucial moment.

Who is sufficient for these things? Surely once again we are shown that unless the Lord is gracious toward us there would be no hope.

### **FOR FURTHER STUDY**

1. List all the uses of salt and try to apply these things to the Christian life.
2. The Church will never convert the world. Do you agree or disagree? Explain and defend your answer.
3. How can a Christian lose his "saltiness"?
4. With a good Concordance look up the Bible verses which refer to Light, (i.e. Genesis 1, John 1:5-9, 1 John 1:5, etc.)
5. Read the parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13). What does this parable warn against?
6. Study the expressions "Grieve not the Holy Spirit" and "Quench not the Holy Spirit." How would you explain these commands?

## **REQUIRED RIGHTEOUSNESS**

### **MATTHEW 5:17-48**

We have come now to one of the major divisions in the Sermon on the Mount. Heretofore Christ has been giving us a definition and description of a Christian. In the words of the Beatitudes, we see the picture as well as the progression involved in this description. He begins with the awakening to one's sinful condition and continues through his spiritual pilgrimage to the full stature of a child of God. We have seen the world's reaction to this sort of person, basically the same reaction it had to Jesus Christ, rejection and persecution. At the same time, this rejected, persecuted Christian is the world's one hope. He serves as salt to preserve and prevent, for a time, the inevitable process of deterioration and judgment. As the light of the world, the Christian demonstrates the new life which Christ gives.

In this major section of the Sermon with which we will now be dealing, we discover the kind of righteousness, in relationship to the law of God, which Christ expects and demands of His people. If there is one great misunderstanding of the Bible on the part of Christian people, it is at this point. Somehow we have gotten the idea that the law of God is passed, that since we are Christians, we have no real obligation to the law. Nothing could be further from the truth. You will hear people say that we are saved by grace and not by works, and this is perfectly true, but it is also perfectly false if by this they are also saying that the Christian has no obligation to good works. You will hear people say that the only law required of the Christian is the law of love. Again this is true only if it is clearly understood what all is involved in obeying the law of love. How often have you heard that it is the spirit of the law which really counts, and we are obliged to obey the spirit rather than the letter of the law? True again, but do you understand that obedience to the spirit of the law is far more demanding and exacting than the letter of the law?

Christ knew that it was very important for His people to understand the relationship between law and grace, and that they fully realize their own duty to the law of God. Let me clear up one point. We are talking about the basic law of God/comprehended in the Ten Commandments and elaborated on throughout the Old Testament, and the New. We are not talking about all the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, though there is more there than we guess. So when we refer to the law, let us be sure which law we have in mind.

To understand our relation to the law and the attitude Christ expects us to have, we begin by looking at His relationship to the law, and His attitude toward it. "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 the key verse. As you know, there is a vast difference between fulfilling and destroying. What did He mean? In what way did Christ fulfill the law? First of all, He fulfilled the law of God by living a life of perfect obedience to it. He was "made under the law." As God, He was the Lord and giver of the law, but as man. He humbled Himself, and submitted to the law. It would be irreverent to attempt to probe too deeply into the purposes and intentions of God, and it would be impertinent to speak with too much authority about the agreement between the Father and the Son. However, it is apparent from the revelation we have that it was necessary for man's salvation that someone of the race keep the law perfectly. This Christ did. He lived in perfect harmony with the law of God, and was obedient in every way to each one of the laws.

This is not the whole story. He also came to fulfill the law and the prophets by becoming the perfect sin offering. He bore the curse of the law. He paid the penalty for man's careless and willful disobedience to it. He died to redeem us from the penalty of the law, and set us free from bondage to its debt. But never, never, never anywhere did He tell us that we were free from keeping the law. Breaking the law means sin and guilt. Thank God that sin and guilt have been taken away by Christ fulfilling the law. He warned us that we were neither to break the law nor to teach others that they might be free to ignore it. If it was His purpose to fulfill the law, does it not also follow that the Christian's purpose must be nothing less? Of course, we cannot fulfill it to the complete perfection which He achieved, or anywhere remotely near it, but we can accept its authority and rule over our lives. The law was originally given to show redeemed people how to live and to guide them into useful, joyful and happy lives. It still has those purposes.

Another key verse in our understanding of this part of the Sermon on the Mount is to be found in these words: "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." At this point, we need to understand the righteousness of these people, and why it was not acceptable. Do not make the mistake of building a straw man to knock down, or you will miss the whole point. The scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day were the "good people," the "church goers" of their time. They believed in the law of God. They practiced it after a fashion that would put most of us to open shame. Church attendance? They never missed. Tithing? A tenth of everything. Prayer? They prayed much and even were so bold as to pray in public, on street corners. Zealous? None could match them. What was wrong? Why was their righteousness unacceptable?

At the risk of oversimplification, let me say that they attempted to rationalize the law. They missed the whole point. They thought that if they could interpret the law to make it possible for them to meet its demands, they would place God in their debt. How often we, too, are guilty of the same mentality. They tried to reduce the letter of the law to its lowest common denominator, and ignored the spirit or intention behind the law. They did not realize that by the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified.

How then can our righteousness exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees? Jesus gave us five concrete illustrations to show how this is possible. In short, He showed us what the spirit of the law is all about. The spirit of the law does not negate the letter; it includes the letter and goes far beyond it. Let us examine in some detail each of these five illustrations which make up the balance of the fifth chapter of Matthew.

1. The first illustration Christ used was the law, "You shall not murder." The law is very plain and straightforward. It is a great sin to do murder. (The correct translation of kill.) The scribes and the Pharisees felt that so long as they refrained from acts of violence against their fellowmen, they were safe so far as this law was concerned. They kept the law to the letter. However, they did not keep the intention of the law as God gave it to us. Jesus taught us that we are to go beyond simply refraining from acts of violence against our fellowman, we must even guard against the attitudes which might lead us to do murder. If we hate our brother, we have broken this law, because we have broken its spirit and purpose. If we hold our brothers in contempt, we are also guilty. This is a very deadly and dangerous attitude to harbor toward another. Pride and cruelty are very close kin. Anytime you are guilty of looking down on others, you are violating this law. The horrible crimes of Nazi Germany against the Jewish people began with contempt for the Jews, contempt led to hatred and hatred to murder on a scale such as the human race had never witnessed before. Our own forefathers were guilty of holding the simple African tribesmen in contempt, and this led to mass slavery, and even murder.

Yet there is still another danger. If we are angry with our brothers without cause, or even with cause, we may allow ourselves to culture and nurture that anger until it becomes full-fledged hatred. Truly we must guard the doors of our hearts, lest we become guilty of breaking this command. The letter is very, very important but the spirit is even more so in the final sense.

If we were to follow up all the teaching of Christ on this subject, we would discover that this commandment requires that we love our neighbors as ourselves. This is the real spirit of the law. The Catechism makes it quite clear that obedience to this law means that we will actively promote the well-being and safety of our fellow man. Careless drivers take heed! So we can conclude that failure to love each other leads toward the actual violation of this law of God. It is evident from the New Testament narratives that the scribes and Pharisees miserably failed to keep the spirit of the law. Do not forget that Jesus said that our righteousness must exceed theirs if we are to enter the kingdom.

2. The next illustration of the point is the law that read, "You shall not commit adultery." Once again we see that the outward observation of this law is not enough. Even the scribes and Pharisees found it necessary to hedge this law about with all sorts of conditions and "escape clauses." We are living in an age that hardly even does lip service to this law. Yet it remains unchanged and unchanging, as do all the laws of God.

Jesus dealt with this law from two considerations. First, He taught that we must not only avoid the actual act of immorality and adultery, but that we must keep our hearts clean, and our minds pure. How difficult this has become in a society which seems to have cast aside all restraint and has become preoccupied (as well as occupied) with sex. Overtly and subtly we are being bombarded with sex propaganda. Most items for sale are advertised with a sex angle. Even the little children have picked it up, and think this is all there is to life. No wonder our youths are confused and weakened in their purity. Incidentally, this is a point at which the Christian must let his light shine. Where the world is the darkest, there the light of the believer is sorely needed.

Jesus said that if we allow our minds to be held captive by impure thoughts, we are guilty of committing adultery. Martin Luther said that we cannot prevent birds from flying over our heads, but we can prevent them from building nests in our hair. Christ went on to say that no price is too great to pay for inner, personal purity. He said that if your right arm offends you, cut it off and cast it away. Now obviously the Lord was not teaching self-mutilation as the way into the Kingdom, but He was saying that we must guard our hearts at any cost. We must be willing to give up our dearest idol, even our fondest friend, if necessary. Whatever is leading you into impurity of thought or action should be cast away from you. This is a very serious matter.

Another perspective from which Jesus viewed this law was that of divorce. Let me say very quickly, with no intention of offending anyone that divorce is a tragic failure of something God intended to last for a lifetime. We have allowed the changing laws of men which govern this relationship to delude us into thinking that the law of God has somehow changed. We tend to feel that Moses gave the stern, rigid law and Christ softened it with love. Not so. Christ was much more demanding in His interpretation of this law than Moses ever was. Moses said divorce must be strictly regulated. Jesus said divorce for any reason, save adultery, demonstrates a tragic failure. You see the whole point is that an outward, letter obedience to this law is not enough. We are to strive after positive purity and goodness. We are to search out God's purpose in this law, and live by that.

The further we go into these illustrations the more we see how utterly impossible it is to be a Christian or live the kind of life Jesus taught us in our strength. The new birth is an absolute necessity, forgiveness of sin our only hope. We are forced to cry out with the Psalmist, "If thou, Lord, should mark iniquity, O Lord, who shall stand?"

3. The third illustration of the point is in the matter of oath-taking. This involved both the Third and Ninth Commandments. Obedience to both these laws requires attention to the spirit. We must always honor the great name of God by being honest in thought, word and actions. We must bear the truth in love and never allow ourselves to fall victim of profanity or dishonesty. We must live in such a way that our word will be respected and honored without need for oaths or vows to enforce our witness.

4. The next illustration does not deal with the Ten Commandments as such, but it does deal with the most widely known of all Old Testament sayings, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." This is not as bad as many make it out to be. What it does is regulate the matter of retaliation with basic fairness. This law seeks to curb man's natural instinct of retaliation. Human nature being what it is, we are likely to go far beyond the law in our demand for retribution. If we lose an eye to our fellowman in a scrape, we are prone to take both of his eyes, as well as the rest of his head. The law says retaliation must not exceed offense.

For the Christian this is not enough. Christ taught us there was a deeper purpose behind this law than simply controlling retaliation. Its real purpose is to eliminate the spirit of retaliation from our hearts.

Not only must we control the limits of retaliation, we must do away with the thought and desire. This is not easy to do. For most of us, the best we can manage is to grit our teeth, count ten, and be comforted with the thought that the Lord will one day judge the wicked. Christ said that we must not even want to get even. This takes much grace, but He can supply it. He set the perfect example on the cross when He prayed for those who crucified Him, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

6. The last illustration of the principle is the law of love. Loving our friends and neighbors is one thing, but Christ said to love our enemies also. He said, "Bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you." In this way, we demonstrate that we are children of our heavenly Father who sends the blessings of sunshine and rain upon all. It will also show that we are brothers of Jesus Christ who died, the Just for the unjust. Even the scribes and Pharisees love those who love them, but that is not good enough. We must exceed that. We live in a spirit of love, ready to accept all and forgive every offense.

Finally, the Lord tells us that we are to be perfect even as our Father in heaven is perfect. Why did He give us an impossible goal? There is only one ideal and perfect pattern, God Himself. Of course, we cannot achieve the perfections of God, but dare we pattern our lives after an imperfect pattern? The glorious secret of the gospel which is no secret is that Jesus Christ is perfect and He gives to us His own perfection that we may stand complete before God. He covers us with His righteousness, while at the same time He gives us His Holy Spirit to lead us into actual goodness. The imputed righteousness becomes more and more the imparted righteousness. Thus our righteousness will exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees.

### **FOR FURTHER STUDY**

1. What are the purposes of the Ten Commandments?
2. When Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said by them of old times ... but I say to you...", did He negate any of the Ten Commandments?
3. Define the "Spirit" of the law.
4. In what sense did Christ fulfill the law and the prophets?
5. In what sense are you required to fulfill the law and the prophets?
6. Is anger ever justified? Explain.



## **TESTING YOUR MOTIVES**

### **MATTHEW 6:1-18**

One of the most amazing things about the Sermon on the Mount is that it leaves no area of life untouched. It brings it all under the searchlight of God's Word to examine, to correct, to rebuke and condemn. Jesus left nothing out. He went beyond the letter of the law, and taught that keeping the law requires obedience to the purpose and spirit behind the letter. He went beneath the surface of superficiality and calls upon us to follow Him into the depths.

In the last chapter we saw that although the scribes and Pharisees were experts at keeping the letter of the law, they failed to understand the true nature of the law, and failed to reckon with the nature of God Himself. Jesus said our righteousness must exceed that outward obedience that does not bring with it an inner and spiritual assent to the law of God and to the God of the law.

Now we must go one step further and deal with the matter of motivation. In this part of His great Sermon, the Lord deals not so much with what you do but rather why you do it. Basically, the Christian life begins with motives and attitudes and it is in this area we must stand our most severe test. This will expose us and rebuke us more quickly and thoroughly than any other test. At the same time, this can be the most spiritually beneficial bit of self-examination in which we may ever engage ourselves.

It is the motive behind the deed which determines its worth and value in the eyes of God. Two men may give large sums of money to the church. One may be rewarded by his Father in heaven; the other may lose his reward. Two people may serve in the same office in the church and perform the same duties, one winning and the other losing the heavenly rewards of which Jesus spoke. To be more specific, two people performed acts of friendship toward Jesus Christ in His last days on earth. One poured costly ointment on His feet and wiped them with her hair. This is remembered as one of the most loving and beautiful expressions of devotion the world has ever witnessed. Jesus was so impressed with what she did that He said she would be remembered everywhere His gospel would be preached. Another person came to Him and greeted Him with a kiss of friendship saying, "Hail, Master." This deed, too, is remembered. It is remembered as the most base and treacherous act of deceit to ever disgrace the sacredness of friendship. You see in both cases the important question is not what they did, but why they did it.

Paul talks about motivation in the well-known and loved chapter on love. He said that no amount of zeal or service could atone for a failure to love. He was talking about the test of motivation when he said, "Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned and have not charity, it profits me nothing." Any idea that Paul preached another gospel than that which Jesus proclaimed is sheer nonsense.

In the opening words of this section, Jesus laid down the principle and then proceeded to illustrate it. We discover this method throughout His entire teaching ministry. The principle is stated in these words, "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."

This suggests a rather delicate balance between this principle and another which He articulated in these words. "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father in heaven." The Lord wants us to perform good deeds, and He wants us to perform them so that others may see our good works, but the difference comes at the point of motivation. We must never perform our good deeds or practice our religion just that others may see our good works. This must not be our motive. Our motive must be the glory of God. We want men to see our good works so that they will glorify our Father in heaven, not us. Here we are warned against the sin of self in the practice of our religion. If the praise of men is our primary goal, then we shall achieve it, but we will miss the whole point of faith, even acceptance and praise from God.

On the other hand, we could make a very serious mistake by hiding our light under a cover, or by burying our one talent in the ground for fear of criticism. If you cannot endure criticism, you have no business trying to serve the Lord in any public way. If you are serving your Father in heaven and striving to please and glorify Him, then you can accept criticism graciously and learn by it, even if it is not well meant. We simply cannot sit back and leave it to others for fear of being criticized.

Having stated this principle, the Lord then goes on to give us three illustrations which show us how we may practice our righteousness to glorify God and not to be seen of men. These illustrations deal with some of the most basic of all Christian virtues and good deeds, the practice of charity, prayer, and self-denial. Let us examine these one by one.

The first of these is in the realm of good deeds (alms) toward those in need. In this day of needed emphasis on the feeding of the hungry, the clothing of the naked and the care of the poor, the church needs to learn this lesson from Christ. In our practice of charity. He warns us against two faults. The first of these is keeping our own little ledger sheet record of good deeds. He expressed it this way, "Do not let your right hand know what your left hand is doing." By this He meant to warn us against mentally cataloging our good deeds. The temptation might be to compare this list of good deeds with a superficial list of our sins and end up attempting to justify ourselves on the grounds that our good deeds outnumber our sins. We must not fall to this temptation, even in a subconscious way. To do so is to deny the basics of the gospel. We must never attempt to justify ourselves before God, but trust Him to justify us in Christ.

We must realize that although our purpose in life is to please God and glorify Him, yet we must never allow the practice of righteousness to be a substitute for the righteousness which Christ alone can give us.

The second fault He mentions would be to perform our deeds of kindness and charity in such a way that everyone would be sure to notice. He said, in effect, "Don't blow a trumpet to call attention to your good deeds." To put it in a very colloquial way, "Don't toot your own horn, " All of us love praise, and we are most ingenious in our ability to let it be known that we have performed some good deed, or have given a large sum of money to the church. If the expression of your concern for others is a matter of justifying yourself or of calling attention to yourself, this springs from a selfish motive and is not pleasing to your heavenly Father. There is nothing more shallow even in the eyes of man than some deed of charity which has as its primary motive the gratification of the giver. I have known people who love to give baskets to the poor at Christmas time that they might make a big show of it. Now baskets to the poor can be a very fine thing, but the next time you do it and take along half the Sunday School class and make a big show of it, try to imagine how the recipient feels as you stand there beaming in all your glory. Are you not sounding a trumpet that you may be seen of men? "Blessed are the meek."

II. The second illustration deals with the matter of prayer. We might be tempted to think that there could never be any danger of sin in praying, but Christ said there was. We will not attempt a detailed analysis of the Lord's Prayer at this point, but we will notice certain things He had to say about prayer in general. "But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door..." The idea is that we should make very sure that we are praying to God and not to be heard of men. This is true even in public prayer. We pray for others in public and try to voice the common concerns of all, but we may very easily slip over into the realm of praying to the public, rather than to God. Perhaps you have heard the delightful story told to Dwight L. Moody, the great evangelist. It was reported that at one of Moody's meetings, he called upon a prominent minister to lead in prayer. The good brother took the occasion to deliver a flowery oration under the guise of prayer. Moody stood it as long as he could then arose to his feet and announced to a startled assembly, "While our brother is finishing his prayer, let us all stand and sing a hymn," Christ was not forbidding or condemning public prayer, but public or private, our prayers must be to God alone. A professor of mine in seminary once forgot to announce in chapel that his Hebrew class would meet in another room because of a conflict in schedule of some sort. When he gave the benediction, he asked the Lord to bless his Hebrew class which would meet today in Room 201 rather than its usual place. A very clever way of getting the point across but surely a violation of Christ's principle of prayer.

Jesus said, "...pray to your Father who is in secret." We go to God believing that "He is and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him." When we turn to Him in prayer, we do so with the realization that He is there with us. He hears me when I pray. He is my Father who loves me and who hears and answers prayer. He knows what I need before I ask Him. He is not so much interested in what I say or how long I pray, but rather that I really commune honestly and sincerely with Him.

III. The third illustration deals with the matter of fasting or self-denial. It may seem a bit unreal for us to even talk about fasting when this is no longer a common practice in the church. By the way, fasting and dieting have little, if anything, in common. Dieting tries to cover up or undo over-indulgence that you may be seen of men, only a little less of you than before. Fasting is a practice of self-denial because you would be seen and rewarded by your heavenly Father. Although the actual practice of fasting is little used, the principle behind it is very important. Fasting is separation of oneself from the things of this world that you might concentrate on the things of God. Self-denial is the principle back of fasting. If our self-denial is done in such a way as to say, "Look at me. I am denying myself. Isn't this a fine thing to do?", then we are not really denying ourselves at all. We are doing just the opposite; we are indulging ourselves. Self-denial means just that. We deny self that God might have the glory and honor. The only valid way to practice self-denial according to Jesus is to do it in such a way that no one else will suspect that you are denying yourself.

Now at this point, unless we stop and apply this test of motivation to our own lives, we will have missed the whole point of what Christ was saying. As we will discover at the end of this Sermon, it is not the hearers of the word who will be justified, but those who practice His commands. So let us attempt to apply these things to our everyday practice of our Christian lives. How can we apply this test to our lives? Certainly not out of morbid fear, thinking that if we come up short at any point we are not Christians, and God will condemn us. Not at all. As we learn by the Word of God to judge ourselves, and discover where we have fallen short, then by His grace we may amend our lives. As Paul said, we judge ourselves that we may not be judged by God. Setting aside the fears of judgment, we take these words of Jesus and make an honest and frank appraisal of our lives by them.

You may want to begin by asking yourself, "Why do I come to church?" Is it to be seen of men or is it my desire to worship my Father in heaven and to glorify Him? If you only come to church out of habit or because of social pressure, then your motives need questioning and amending. Let me share a secret of worship with you. Every Sunday morning when I enter the pulpit and join the congregation in silent prayer during the prelude, I try to pray this prayer: "Father, may the Lord Jesus be present in this service." Then I try to think of Him as being present. Without trying to picture His form or face, I try to see Him walking up and down among the people, blessing them, placing His hands on them and loving them. In this way, the worship service which follows becomes a thrilling experience of Jesus Christ being with His church.

Another form in which this test of motivation may be used is something like this: Do I tend to become discouraged and abandon the appointed task when others fail to recognize and appreciate what I am doing? So many Christians fall victim to this temptation and fail this test. Why do you serve in your given place in the church? Is it to be seen of men? We may apply this test to so many things we do supposedly for the sake and glory of the Lord.

To a greater or lesser degree we all fail the motive test. We are guilty at this most crucial point. It should be obvious that no amount of determination or human effort can correct this situation. We must have a new self. We must, in the words of Jesus, be born again. Is there any greater evidence for the need of the new birth? At the same time, the new birth must lead us into a new life. We must practice active obedience to His every command at all points in our lives. It takes a day by day, point by point surrender of the self to the Lordship of Christ, else our old natures will remain dominant, and simply take on a religious dress and disguise.

The motive test is a very demanding and painful experience, but it is a vital and necessary part of our spiritual pilgrimage. If we are willing to be honest with ourselves and with the Lord, if we are willing to face the truth and accept the pain, then we are truly on the right road which leads to life everlasting. Let us return to the first words of this great Sermon, our final word of wisdom and guidance, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted." Applying the motive test to ourselves involves both the requirements and the promises of these Beatitudes.

#### **FOR FURTHER STUDY**

1. Why is it so important that our motives be pure?
2. What is the highest motive for the Christian?
3. Define charity.
4. What does this chapter suggest about some of our schemes to promote stewardship in the Church?
5. What does self-denial really mean? (See Relations 2:20 and 6:14).

## **LIVING THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IN A SECULAR WORLD AVOIDING THE CAPTIVITY TO “THINGS”**

### **MATTHEW 6:19-24**

As we have seen in the last chapter, the way and spirit in which we practice the things of our religion are very important. We must be sincere in our motivations if we are to be true to the teachings of Christ. However, there is more to life than just the practice of strictly religious matters; i.e., prayer, charity, fasting, worship, etc. The Christian must realize that he is living in a secular world. These verses and this section of the Sermon on the Mount deal with one aspect of living in this world, our relationship to material things.

This relationship to our world is one of the major concerns of the serious Christian. We know that we are now living in this world as it is. We also know there is another world in which we will live some day and that future world has a very direct and strong bearing on how we live in this present world. We understand that we are now preparing ourselves for that which will be realized in the world to come. We remember the story Christ told of the three men who were varying amounts of talents by their king. Upon his return from a long journey, their faithfulness over these talents he had given them determined their position and reward in his kingdom. We know this story was told for and to us.

There are two extreme attitudes to which people turn in their approach to living in this world. First, there is what we shall call the monastic view. This was the direction in which the church went during the middle ages. The world was violent and evil, and men turned to the world of cloistered monasteries to preserve the Christian faith, to study and pray. Following the Reformation and the Renaissance, this world view was rejected by the church at large, but still remnants of this thinking linger on. The monastic view of the world still holds that it is an evil place and that the Christian must reject it and its people. The person who adopts this view seems to say, "This world is bad; if I am not careful, I will be corrupted by it, therefore I must shut myself off from it in so far as possible."

Although very few people admit openly such an attitude, we can see something of it in the way in which many people react to their society and their community. Instead of obeying Christ's command to penetrate the world with the gospel, they band together in small groups and enjoy their faith and sing, "Hold the fort for I am coming." There is some good and some truth in such an attitude, but there is much wrong with it, too.

In contrast to this monastic view of life, there is the other extreme, the libertine philosophy. This is the prevailing view in our time. The person who lives by this code will say, "This life right now is all that counts. God made all things so I will enjoy all things, I will accept no law over me except what I feel is right for me. Tear down all stop signs and erase all 'don'ts' and 'thou shall nets'. I am a free person." It is really amazing to me how many church people seem to have adopted this philosophy. They speak scathingly of "pietism" and "puritans". They glory in the new morality and situational ethics. Though there are some seeds of truth in this position, there is very much that is wrong and sinful about it.

Rejecting the error of both these extreme views, the Christian attempts to walk the narrow line which Jesus gave us. To be sure, there is much wrong with this

world and there are evil people who live in it, as there have always been. The power of evil is alarming and distressing, but instead of ignoring the world or hiding from it, we are to remember that we are the light of the world and the salt of the earth. We are and always shall be definitely involved in this world. Yet we also realize that life must not center in the things of this world, and life does not consist in the abundance of things we possess. There are still some things to which the Christian must say no, and say it loud and clear and often.

Christ's teachings are as a breath of fresh air on this subject. He did not evade or ignore the issue. He warned us against loving this world so much that we lose sight of life's real values. At the same time He warned us against allowing worldly things to become our main concern and worry. If we love the world and the things of the world too much, the next step is worry and anxiety over these things. There is a natural progression of sin at this point, so our Lord warns against both love and worry over things. We find in the teachings of Christ both advice and warning and good reasons for both. Let us consider the warning first since He placed it first.

Jesus said, "Lay not up for yourselves treasure on earth." These words, though plain and simple, demand a careful look and thoughtful examination. First what are these "earthly treasures" to which He referred? This treasure would not necessarily be money, though for some, money could be the problem. However, Jesus was talking about our attitudes toward material things of any kind. Our treasures are those things we count of greatest value to us. This could be money or it could be the things which money buys. It could be status, social position, the acclaim of our fellow man. This could be our business or even our pleasure. More than one Christian has been rendered completely ineffective because he has become so wrapped up in his cabin in the mountains or his boat or some other form of "pleasure and recreation. It is not the possession or enjoyment of these things which Christ was warning us about, but it was allowing ourselves to be possessed by them.

Here is the warning, don't allow the things of this world to take control of your heart and mind, your time and your abilities. Don't make the mistake of the rich fool Jesus talked about. Upon the reaping of an unusually good harvest one year, he decided to tear down his barns and build greater ones. After finishing this project, he settled back to enjoy life with the careless attitude. "Soul thou hast much goods laid up for many years, eat, drink and be merry." What he failed to reckon with happened. He had less than twenty-four hours in which to live and "enjoy" life.

If your life centers in yourself and the things you possess (or which possess you), then God is left out. He refuses to co-exist with any man's idol, whether it be a graven image or an idol of the mind and will. Let us pause to remember that Jesus was talking to those who were His disciples, to those who followed Him. There is no point talking this way to the man of the world. To him this is so much nonsense to begin with. To the Christian Jesus is saying, "Do not invest the best of your time and money and interests in the things of this world. Do not lay up for yourselves treasure on earth. "John reminds us in his First Epistle, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. ...for the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever." Don't think this possession by worldly treasures can never happen to Christian people. It can and it does.

More than one good man I have known in my ministry has been turned aside from the things of the Kingdom through promotion and prosperity. Being spiritually unprepared for success is far more dangerous than being unprepared for defeat and discouragement. What made these cases so sad was that these men did not even realize how their values in life had shifted. I have even known

ministers in the church who were rendered ineffective in Christ's kingdom because they were so fond of prestige and position. They compromised basic convictions for the sake of promotion. The good will of their congregations and colleagues became more important to them than the good will of Christ, and faithfulness to His Word.

There is a real and subtle danger facing us all, that the Christian may allow the love of things to become stronger than His love for Christ. Before we realize what has happened to us, the words of Christ's warning seem so unreal and we even forget He ever said, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth."

Christ followed up His warning with words of good advice, "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven." He was not teaching a doctrine of salvation by works. Remember He was talking to people who were already saved. You can never, never earn salvation. This only comes by true faith in Christ and His finished work on the cross. But there are heavenly treasures which we may lay up. This Jesus commanded us to do. He taught us that they were of great importance. They are of infinitely greater value than any earthly treasures. I know there are people who say that we should not labor for reward, but just for the Lord's sake. That sounds very good, at least at first glance, but remember it was Jesus who counseled us to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven.

What are these heavenly treasures which He thought were so important? The principle is just the opposite of the earthly treasures He warned us about. When He said, "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven," He was talking about a way of life in which God comes first in your plans and in your doing. He was talking about a proper stewardship of life, a matter of establishing priorities according to the Word and Will of God. He was talking about making your wealth, your talents, your time, and your life count for Him above all things. He wants us to be faithful over our few things in this life that He might make us ruler over many things in the life to come.

By these words Jesus meant for us to know that heaven is a real place, inhabited by real people, a perfected people. You see, it's all a matter of priorities and a proper attitude toward the things of this world. You do not have to be great or even rich to be faithful and to have the right attitude toward the world. I have known ministers who were not possessed with great talents and gifts and who never served in churches of great size, yet who were obviously more dedicated with their few gifts than many men with much talent and great opportunity. Such ministers are laying up for themselves treasures in heaven. I have known men of considerable wealth, either earned or inherited, yet who were not captives of their possessions and who were seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. These men, too, though possessed with much earthly goods, were laying up for themselves treasures in heaven. These men knew that their earthly treasures were of little consequence unless they used them for the glory of God.

All Christians are called upon to adopt this philosophy of life. It matters not the size of your wealth or of your talents and gifts, the only thing that really counts is that you know that all earthly treasures are nothing compared to heavenly treasures.

The reasons Christ attached to His words of warning and counsel are worth a few moments of serious reflection. He said in His warning against laying up earthly treasures. "...where neither moth and rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal." This is meant to teach us that nothing in this world is lasting or permanent. Everything in this world will perish with the world itself, if not before. Isn't it a shame that man with his immortal soul and his bright prospect of eternity spends the best of his time, his wealth, his energy and skill on things that are not lasting? None of the things of this world offer lasting satisfaction or comfort. If the

end and goal of your life is the acquisition and enjoyment of things, then you are doomed to restlessness and disappointment. The possession of things doesn't really meet the needs of our lives. We are created in such a way that only God and His kingdom can fill the emptiness of life. When we get the things we think we want, then we start wanting all over again. It is an endless cycle. Think back a few years. Didn't you think then that if you could only have what you now possess you would be content? Are you? Or are you already restlessly contemplating pulling down your barns and building greater ones?

There is no security in earthly treasures. They can be taken from you in a moment. You may not think so, but it is true. You can begin a day in relative comfort, ease, and modest wealth, but before that same day is over you can be shrouded in unbelievable sorrow, poverty and emptiness. Job is the classic case in point. In one day all his wealth was taken from him and his dearest treasure of all, his children, all of them at once. Oh no, none of us can have any assurance whatsoever that our possessions will be ours by day's end.

The best reason of all for heeding the warning and following the counsel is to be found in these words, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." In other words, possessions tend to possess. They capture our minds, energies and in the end, our hearts. Thus we become slaves to things rather than profitable servants of God.

Remember the Lord did tell us to lay up treasures in heaven. He said of these, "...neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal." These are the lasting things. They never pass away, nor do they lose their attractiveness. They meet the deepest needs and longings of our best efforts. They cannot be taken away by anything on this earth, they endure beyond death. They are not subject to thievery or corruption. They offer eternal peace, contentment and joy to those who lay them up in heaven. Here our Lord tells us that our enjoyment and satisfaction in heaven will depend to a degree on our diligence in preparing for heaven while we live on earth. How our lives would be radically changed if we only believed the Lord and took seriously His Word. If we would bring our lives into conformity with His great sermon at this point, how glorious would be our lives now and our rewards to follow.

Have you become a captive of earthly possessions? Let Christ break those fetters and allow His Spirit to guide you into the kind of life in which God comes first, and by which you lay up treasures in heaven.

### **FOR FURTHER STUDY**

1. Read I John 2:15-17. What three things does John warn against?
2. What is wrong with the "monastic" view of the world?
3. What are some reasons for rejecting the "libertine" philosophy?
4. Which presents a greater problem to Christian living, poverty or prosperity? Explain.
5. To what extent is your heart and life possessed by possessions?
6. What are the "heavenly treasures"?
7. Read Luke 12:13-34. What commands are given concerning our treasure?



## **LIVING THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IN A SECULAR WORLD THE ANSWER TO WORRY, FAITH NOT FEAR**

### **MATTHEW 6:24-34**

In the last chapter we dealt with the problem of possessions. We saw that the Lord warned us against allowing possessions to possess us, and thus robbing ourselves of eternal blessings and robbing God of the glory we owe to Him. Now we look at His words on the other side of the coin, the problem of worry. We may win victory at the point of our attitude toward earthly treasures and overcome the danger of being possessed by our possessions, and then lose the battle on the other front, the temptation to worry about these same things.

When Jesus said, "Do not be anxious... ", He was really saying in our terms, "Do not worry." That's quite an order. Surely worry is our most constant and common foe. Worry and undue anxiety about this world and the things of this world pose a major threat to the Christian living his life as Jesus taught it.

When Jesus accused us of having little faith, He was not talking about saving faith; He was talking about living trust. This is what is meant by living on faith. What Jesus was concerned about was not that we may lose our souls, but that we may lose our victory and our peace in this life and become unworthy and unprofitable servants which would be a great tragedy for all concerned.

It is not possible to escape the problems of worry and anxiety, but it is possible to deal with these things, and by the grace of God to conquer them and transform them into zeal and energy in Christ's service. Maybe some of you have read C. S. Lewis' book called "The Great Divorce". It is an allegory of heaven. Although it is difficult to follow all he says in this story and it is impossible to agree with all his implications, yet there is much good in the book. One of the stories which are very much to the point here is that of the man who carried around a loathsome lizard-like creature on his shoulder. He hated it and feared it, yet he would not give it up. Finally, one of the angels escorting the company of men through the outer reaches of heaven asked the man if he wanted to be delivered from the terrible creature on his back. After much agony the man agreed to let the angel slay the beast. Even as he yielded and the lizard was slain, it was transformed into a beautiful white stallion. The man leaped on his back and was borne away with joy and victory. The lizard represented lust which the man both hated and loved, but when he finally was willing to give it up, it was transformed into love, true godly love, and became his servant instead of his master. God can do the same thing with your anxiety and worry.

Christ had the answer to the problem of worry and His ancient words are ever fresh and timely. The formula He offers carries with it the authority and wisdom of the Son of God, and the certification of time and experience. The climax to all He said about the matter of worry and anxiety may be summed up in these words, "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." To understand that, you must first deal with the verses which lead up to it.

This section begins with these words, "Do not be anxious..." which as we have seen means, do not be overcome with worry and fear. The Lord did not intend to forbid foresight or planning. However, if we yield to the temptation to worry and be

filled with anxiety, our planning and scheming is merely an expression of fear, rather than faith. Notice the things Jesus said we are not to worry about: food, clothing, shelter. These are the very things we do worry most about. We excuse ourselves on the basis that these are bare necessities. Christ's optimism is based on the faith that God is the giver and sustainer of life. Our lives on this earth will not end before His appointed time, and He will provide our needs. Our heavenly Father knows we have need of these things. He loves us, we are His children. In our hearts we know all this but still we worry.

If we can understand the reasons for our worry, it will help us to overcome this sin, and live more as Jesus taught us to live in this world. To be very honest, one of the reasons we worry so much is greed and covetousness. Unlike our forefathers who first came to this country, we are particular about the kind of home in which we live; we are very concerned that our closets are filled with the latest fashions in dress; and we throw enough food away to feed much of the rest of the world. Since we put so much emphasis on "the good things" of life, naturally we are going to worry a great deal more about them.

Another reason we worry so much is that we are "of little faith". By little faith we mean that our faith is limited and small in its application. We have trusted the Lord for the saving of our souls and that's about all. We read in the gospels that when Jesus came to a certain town, He could not do many mighty works in their midst because of their unbelief. I wonder how many times that same story has been repeated in our lives? Our little faith blocks many blessings for us, and it also prevents God from working through us to minister to others. We sing a hymn which says, "O what peace we often forfeit, oh what needless pain we bear." You may protest, "I'm just a worrier by nature, and can't help myself." You are a sinner by nature too but God has done something about that. Why can't He do something about your worry?

We worry too much about the things of this world because we have lost the perspective of eternity. When we allow our lives to be centered in this world, and when we forget that our true home is heaven and that the Kingdom of God comes first, then we are easy prey to worry. If there is one thing which marks all the teachings of Jesus, it is the perspective of eternity. We live under its shadow. It shapes us and mold's us into what we are. Go through the books of the New Testament and see how often the dimension of eternity is referred to. Almost all the parables Jesus told are set in the background of eternity. When we lose this, we revert back to the old ways of living self-centered, materialistic lives, and this produces much worry.

Finally, we worry and fret because it is so hard to resist and we do not realize how powerful and dangerous worry may be. We see it as a shortcoming but not as a sin. We accept defeat without joining battle. Christ can conquer worry in your life. If this were not true, He would never have told us not to worry and be fearful.

There are plenty of reasons why we worry, but have you ever stopped to think that there are even better reasons why we should not worry? Christ gave us good reasons in this passage from the Sermon on the Mount. Some are implied in what He said, some are plainly stated.

The great overriding reason why the Christian should not give in to fear and worry is that God our Father is a wise, powerful and loving God, and He has a gracious good will for each one of His children. He is able to make all things work together for good to those who love Him. That alone should end all our worries. Jesus was telling us, "You can really trust your Father. He will take care of your needs." He had learned this through experience.

Worry warps and stunts life. I have known people who worry so much about what might happen to them, and what they fear, that nothing ever brings them joy. It may be sunshine today but you never know about tomorrow. They may have plenty now, but they would rather worry about the possibility that tomorrow they will starve. Worry dishonors God. How can you bear a good witness for the Lord and His faithfulness if you are known as a chronic worrier?

The best reason for not worrying was given us by Jesus, "And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?" Worry doesn't work. That's the reason He told us not to worry. It doesn't accomplish a thing. Worry only drains our will and energy which could be put to better uses.

However, we must be perfectly honest and admit that to a greater or lesser degree we are all victims of this sin. You cannot defeat worry by resolving not to worry. About all this will do is cause you to worry that you have broken your resolve not to worry. The answer to worry is to be found in accepting and believing the words of Jesus. Something else must become more important to us than our own affairs and concerns.

Christ said, "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." In another place the Lord said, "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." Faith; that is the answer to fear. Faith in the word of God which reveals a God who loves us and cares for us and who in Christ has become our heavenly Father. He will supply our needs. Why worry about tomorrow?

More needs to be said about the kind of faith the Lord was showing us. We cannot seek first the kingdom unless by faith we believe there is such a kingdom and that it may be found of those who seek it. This faith demands that we not only seek the kingdom of God but that we seek it first above all others, believing that it is of utmost importance. This kind of faith affirms our relationship to God, that it is an enduring, never changing relationship. He is your Father now and nothing can separate you from Him. He will always be your Father, even in times of adversity and trial, suffering and pain. Even when you fail to be true to Him, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself.

This faith must be an ever growing faith, growing not only in depth and intensity but in scope, ever expanding its sphere of operation, ever moving out into all areas of life. This faith must be applied right down where you live every day, a working faith that actually produces. With this kind of faith we can know the victory that overcomes the world. This is what Jesus had in mind. He wants His disciples to be victorious in all the battles of life. He knows that victory is possible. Too often we are content with less. Doesn't it ever bother you that the best you have been able to do is to come to the Lord over and over again confessing, "Lord, I failed again"? Wouldn't you like to know some victories? Here is the way to live a Christian life in a secular world, seek first the kingdom in this world. There is almost a suggestion of humor here. It is almost as if the Lord were saying to us, "If you must worry at least worry about important things, like the Kingdom of God."

The promise which accompanies this challenge is one that requires faith to believe and claim. In the same sentence in which the Lord said, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness." He went on to promise, "And all these things will be added to you." Can we trust God that much? Can we believe that if we put the things of His Kingdom first in our lives that He will take care of the lesser things? "All these will be added to you." He meant us to take Him at His word. God challenges us in the Book of Malachi, "Prove me herewith and see..." This is the divine dare of these verses. Put God to the test; prove Him, that's what He invites you to do. Christ, the Son of God, knew that He could trust the Father even though

the cross was in His plan for His Son. Go taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is everyone who trusts in Him.

If you are willing to truly seek first the kingdom and believe that all these things shall be added to you, then you are ready for the last verse in this chapter. "Take no thought of the morrow, for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." Very simply the Lord was telling us, live by faith and live one day at the time. The same grace that sustains you today will uphold you tomorrow, no matter what the morrow may bring. This is how to live as Christ taught us in this secular world.

#### **FOR FURTHER STUDY**

1. List some of your own anxieties. Are they necessary?
2. Read Proverbs 3:5-6 and Philippians 4:6-7. How do these verses apply to the problem of worry?
3. At what point does worry and concern become sinful?
4. What are "all these things" Christ promised to those who seek first the Kingdom?

## **JOURNEY TOWARD JUDGMENT**

### **MATTHEW 7:1-6**

The seventh chapter of Matthew is the third and last chapter in Christ's Sermon on the Mount. It is also the beginning of the final major division which has as its theme, judgment. The overall theme deals with the fact that we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, but within this theme, there are several aspects of judgment dealt with. Once again I would point you to the organization and splendid order of His sermon. Christ began by showing us what a Christian is. He defined a Christian in terms of the Beatitudes. He taught us that the practice of our religion must be sincere and spiritual, that it must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. Following this, the Lord talked about living our Christian lives in this present world, with all its problems and difficulties. Now it is as if He were saying to us, "The reason for all this is that we must face the judgment." Do you think that is an unworthy motive? Jesus didn't seem to think so. Almost all the things He said in His last week on earth dealt with judgment, and just a glance at the gospels will show that the record of His last week comprises a major portion of each book.

This sermon in its entirety is addressed to Christians, the people of God who have received the gift of the new birth, yet who must still live in this world and cope with it and with its people. We are a people who are on a journey. We are going somewhere; we have a purpose in life and a destiny to meet. We have a judgment to face. The fact that as a Christian you must one day appear before the judgment seat of Christ to give an account of every deed, word, and thought should have a bearing upon the way you live now from day to day. As Christians we are concerned and sensitive to what others say and think about us at least to a degree, but we are primarily concerned with the judgment of God on our lives. Perhaps there is some confusion here. We are not talking about the judgment to determine if you are saved or lost, nor does the Christian face the same kind of judgment the unbeliever faces, but we do face a time when we shall give an account to the Lord for our stewardship of life.

Strangely enough, this whole section on Judgment begins with an admonition, "Judge not that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged..." It is because we must one day face judgment that Christ said, "Judge not." Because the thought of judgment makes us uneasy and nervous, we have a tendency to turn off anyone who mentions it. Please do not turn this off. As they used to say in the old days of radio between programs, "Don't touch that dial." This is a very important section and these opening words are extremely important.

There is a delicate balance to maintain if we are to understand this admonition. Most of us are too lazy, mentally and spiritually, to concern ourselves with thin lines; yet to err in understanding these words produces confusion and prevents us from living fully as Christ would have us live. Let us be very sure first what this text does not teach. This is an age of compromise and appeasement. This sentiment prevails in all things, religion included. We press for unity and conformity at any price, and the person who steadfastly stands by and for convictions is viewed as a trouble maker. He is quickly rejected in favor of the person who will be easy to get along with, who will accept anyone and everything, and question nothing. Christ never intended that we should be blind to evil, or that we should blithely assume that all

people are good. There are times when we must carefully evaluate what others say and do. At the same time, we are to remember that our own actions and thoughts can stand a bit of self-judgment.

Christ calls upon us to stand for the right and this means we will be involved in a kind of judgment when we do. We must judge between good and evil, right and wrong. At the same time, we accept the fact that when we do, we will be accused of being judgmental.

Therefore, what does this word of Christ teach us? The whole meaning and thrust of these words have to do with our attitudes toward others, and to a degree, toward ourselves. This warns us against rejecting people rather than their wrong actions. Admittedly, it takes some doing to love the sinner while you hate his sin but it can, and indeed must, be done. This also warns us against a vanity so great that we feel ourselves capable of the final word on another person. It is so easy for us to progress (or regress) from exercising proper criticism to becoming a critical person. Have you ever been guilty, when commenting on the actions of another person, of saying, "If she were a real Christian, she would never do that"? Jesus told us that we cannot make the final judgment on another person for this usurps the place of God and brings judgment on ourselves.

As we begin to ask why we are not to judge, we look at the reasons Jesus gave. Isn't it amazing how patient He is with us? Although all power and authority are given to Him, and in Him are hidden all treasures of wisdom and knowledge. He always explains His commands to us. It should be enough to say, "Our Lord has spoken, we will obey." However, He wants us to be mature and wise disciples; therefore, He explains these things to us.

"Judge not that you be not judged." There is a judgment awaiting the people of God as we mentioned earlier. There will come a time when we must appear before Him and give account. This will not be to determine our final destination. This is done when you receive Christ into your heart. When you do this, a sort of personal Passover takes place. You are delivered from the angel of death by the blood of the Lamb. But there is a judgment of works. Even now, in a sense, we are being judged every moment of every day. We may bring judgment and the chastening hand of God upon us by the way we live. If one continually ignores the rules of good health, proper diet, rest, exercise, the care and advice of a physician and indulges in harmful habits, then he brings physical harm and ruin upon himself and there may be no remedy. This is a form of physical judgment we bring upon ourselves. The same principle applies in the spiritual realm. If we neglect the means of grace, if we fail to apply ourselves diligently to living the life Christ taught us, we will be spiritually weak and anemic, unprepared to deal with crisis and temptation. One sure way to bring judgment upon ourselves is to become a judgmental, critical person. "Judge not that you be not judged."

"For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged." That itself is the second reason for not judging. We will be judged by the very standards we set in judging others. If we know the Scriptures, we will be judged by the knowledge. We accuse others of being hypocritical and ignore the fact that we are hypocrites. We excuse in ourselves what we strongly condemn in others. We find reasons (excuses) for being irritable, short-tempered, and hard to live with, but we will accept no excuse from the other person. We accuse others of having insincere motives, but are we really sure that our motives are sincere before the Lord?

We really are not capable of judging others with a true and fair judgment. We are incapable of doing this because we refuse to first judge ourselves. If we would first judge ourselves we would come much nearer being able to judge others fairly. We

tend to judge on personality rather than principle. If we love a person, we will overlook the very things we soundly condemn in those we do not like.

Again, we are not capable of judgment because we are limited in what we really know about the other fellow. If we knew what some people are faced with every day, we would temper our criticism and judgment with mercy. How quickly we judge individuals and races without ever asking, "Why are they so?" People build barriers without bothering to find out why they are there. At an air terminal not long ago a man made a very cutting remark to a young woman about the behavior of her young children which admittedly was terrible. "Lady," he barked, "why don't you tell their father to give them a good thrashing?" The young woman responded, "I wish he could but he has been missing in action for over a year now." How seldom do we know all the facts about others when we judge them.

Yes, there is hypocrisy in us all. We can see the speck in our brother's eye, but we fail to notice the cross tic in our own eye. Jesus said, "You hypocrite, first take the beam out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye." Because we like to pretend to be better than we really are, we suspect others of pretending too. Judge yourself rightly then you may be able to judge your brother more clearly and fairly. Better yet, "Judge not that you be not judged."

This then is what Jesus had to say; if we will only hear and obey Him, we will see an amazing change within ourselves in our relationship to others. We will discover an inner peace; we will learn the meaning of meekness and compassion. Think what this could do in your home, your office, your church. Blessing always awaits obedience, but I do not think any of us realize what blessings obedience to this command would bring.

I once heard an elderly person say that he prayed every day, "Lord, do not let me become a mean old man." God evidently heard that prayer. He was as sweet an old man as you could ever find. He was wise and discerning, but never harsh and judgmental. Obedience to this command of the Lord may well make the difference between a lonely forsaken old age and a rich, sunset experience in the latter years of your life.

The deeper I go into this lesson, the more I am amazed at the grace of God, and the more I become aware that Christ is our righteousness. Apart from His cross and His love, we would dare not delve into these things, but because we want to discover the life that pleases Him, we will endure the pain and the burden, and continue our quest. Now a light falls upon this dark way, God has placed at our disposal the resources needed for this journey. He offers to become our traveling companion in our journey toward judgment.

"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to one who knocks it will be opened." This is one of the most gracious and comprehensive promises in all the Bible and when it is properly understood and applied we will find it more than sufficient for our needs. With this promise we can meet any challenge or crisis, and with it we can journey calmly on. It is as an anchor both steadfast and sure, gripping the rock of Christ.

We would do well to stop and think who gave us this promise. It came from Jesus Christ, the Son of God, speaking in the name of the Father. He was given full authority by the Father, for He was the Word in the beginning with God, and He was God. This promise was also given from the One who learned obedience through suffering. It was a promise based on His own experience. He suffered much, was tempted in all points as we are. He had little of this world's goods but this promise

never failed him. It was given to us by the One who loved us so much that He came into the world to die for our sins. He wants the very best for us, and He knows the very best comes through acceptance of this promise. This word was spoken by the One who is the way, the truth and the life, Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. You see a promise is only as good as the one who makes it, and is effective only to the extent that we are willing to trust the promise and the promiser.

There are several implied truths for us to notice as we attempt to understand and appropriate this gracious word of promise. There is the great need implied. This is set in the background of all the rest of this sermon, a sermon that makes demands we cannot meet in our own strength. It condemns the very best we can do as being not good enough. The only way we can receive the strength and the righteousness which God requires is to ask for it. The only way we can find the answers to our quest for understanding and personal righteousness is to seek for them. Only to those who knock will the way be opened.

An understanding of the construction of the Greek language involved in this verse is very helpful. The Greek tells us that we are to ask and keep on asking, to seek and never cease, to knock and knock and knock again constantly. This is not just a once and for all promise, this is one for life from day to day all the length of our days. We never reach the point at which we no longer need to ask, seek and knock.

The great truth in the background of this promise is that God is our Father. The Lord uses the example of a father's desire to give his son the things he needs. The true father will not mock the son's need. If the son asks for bread, he will not give him a stone; if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a serpent. How much more then may we trust the Lord to give us those things we ask of Him. God really is our Father. We have become His sons both by adoption and regeneration. If we as sinful human beings give to our children good gifts, necessary for their well-being, how much more will our heavenly Father know what we need, and how to supply it. Too often we come to God as if we were not sure how He felt about us, and as if we were beggars. The intention of this promise is to help us realize how really available God is to His children, and how willing He is to answer our requests.

The context of this promise tells us that it has to do with living the Christian life. Those who understand that the purpose of life is to live for the glory of God, which means living life as Jesus taught it, may claim this promise with all the assurance that it will be realized. He never made this promise to the person who seeks first his own comforts and pleasure, hoping that the Kingdom of God may be added to him. No, this promise is only for those whose nature and character is described in the Beatitudes, and who have set out to discover the will of God for their lives.

Jesus said, "...how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!" What are these "good things"? To find this, we must search the Scriptures and attempt to discern what the good things God offers His children are. In the Book of Romans we are told that all things work together for good (for a good thing) to those who love the Lord. The "good thing" in Romans is that we may be conformed to the image of Christ. That is also the "good thing" in this promise. The good gifts our Father gives us have to do with the power and ability to respond to His call and to be able to fulfill His definition and description of a Christian. Is there any better thing for which to ask? Over and over Jesus assures us that God hears and answers prayer and just as often as He says this, He also teaches us to pray in His will and His name. Praying in the name of Christ means asking for things that will honor His name. It means asking for the things He asked for and the things for which He taught us to ask.

As we begin to understand this promised help, we will begin to see why our prayers may not always be answered just the way we ask them or just as we think they should be. We can be very sincere in our asking and still be very wrong in what we ask. The classic case in point is the story of Monica, the mother of St. Augustine. As a youth he was determined to leave his home in North Africa and go to Rome. Monica knew of his wild streak and of the many temptations he would face in that open wicked city. She just knew it could not be God's will for her son to go to Rome. He was deaf to her pleas and the time came for him to leave. The night before he sailed, poor Monica lay all the night on the desert sands, flat on her face, pleading with God not to allow her son to go to Rome. The next morning he sailed away. Monica was heartsick. She could not understand why God would allow her son to go to that wicked city. However, God had heard the real prayer of Monica, the prayer that her son might be saved. While in Rome, Augustine met a group of Christians and through their testimony and influence he became a Christian. Now say that Monica's prayers went unanswered. We are guilty of telling God how He should meet our needs rather than praying for Him to have His perfect way in our lives.

In Luke's Gospel we learn that the one good thing for which we are to pray and for which we have the Father's promise is the gift of the Holy Spirit. He is the gift above all gifts. His power and wisdom and love are needed by the believer, for without His help and presence there could be no Christian life. You may well ask, "Do we not have the Spirit when we receive Christ?" The answer is yes, but our experience and awareness of the Holy Spirit may be increased. We may have all of Him, but He does not have all of us. Our relation to the Holy Spirit is not a static, theoretical matter, but a living experience. Jesus said we are to ask for the Holy Spirit and promised He would be given to those who ask and keep on asking, to those who seek and keep on seeking and to those who knock and keep on knocking.

As a child of God whose aim and purpose in life is to live for Him and with Him, as one who is on a journey that leads to judgment, as one who needs help on this journey and who dares not walk alone, "Ask, seek, knock. " The help is yours for the taking. The promise is yours for the claiming.

#### **FOR FURTHER STUDY**

1. Read the account of Christ's last week in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Note how many times the theme of judgment is stressed.
2. How can we evaluate the spiritual condition of others?
3. According to Christ's illustration of the "mote and beam", what is hypocrisy?
4. Read Luke 11:1-13, 18:1-8. What do these passages teach concerning our attitude in prayer?
5. What are some things we may know we should ask for?
6. What does it mean to pray in Jesus' name?



## **THE GOLDEN RULE**

### **MATTHEW 7:1-12**

Of all the words of Jesus none are more familiar than the words of this verse. Men call it the Golden Rule. "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets." We shorten that to "do unto others as you would have others do unto you." This verse is quoted by Christians and non-Christians alike. It is used as a motto by clubs and organizations, and has truly inspired many to service. This is what is meant by the person who says, "The Sermon on the Mount is my religion." As we shall see, even this is an impossibility unless Christ is living in us.

It would seem that these words are self-explanatory, but they can really be understood only in their proper context. "Therefore" is a key word at this point. The Lord has been telling us that we are approaching a time of judgment. He has told us to avoid judging others, knowing that with what judgment we judge, we will be judged. The verses just preceding this one tell us that the infinite resources of grace and heaven are available to us as we live in this world, preparing for judgment. We are reminded that our heavenly Father knows our needs and freely gives to us the good things we need. This is what goes before the word "therefore". Since all of this is true, we are to deal with our fellow man in a certain way, and that way is the Golden Rule.

Someone has said, "Everyone praises the Golden Rule but no one practices it." There is much truth to that. Stop and think. What if this were practiced on a large scale? What changes would take place on this earth, what changes would take place in your own home and life. Think what could happen in the church, if this rule were applied to the life and work of the church.

Is this a hopeless ideal? Is it an axiom which all respect but know could never work in practical affairs of life? If this were true, Christ would not have told us to practice it. He gave us these words to live by, not talk about; yet if we are to live by them, we must talk about them and come to a clear understanding of what they mean and require. These are not isolated words. There are several passages in the Bible which say the same thing in effect, so obviously the Lord meant us to take them seriously and in a practical way.

In the Book of Micah we read, "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" What is this if it is not the Golden Rule in slightly different form? The story of the Good Samaritan is a living parable of this rule of life. The commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself" is the Golden Rule. The Epistles of John may be viewed in part as an interpretation and development of this rule. We could cite many other passages from either the Old or the New Testament which say the same thing in effect.

There is exclusiveness about this rule; Jesus did not announce to the world at large, "Here is a rule by which you may live." No, He gave this command to His disciples, to the poor in spirit, the meek, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, the peace makers, those who are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We have no business saying to an unbelieving world, "Obey the Golden Rule!" They can't and they won't. What we can do is to show the world through our

lives and obedience to our Lord that there is a better way to live. I think a weakness of the church in our day is that it assumes for itself a role Christ did not give to it. We have become so busy trying to tell the world how to live, how to vote, what to support, etc., that we have little time left to tell them the good news of the love of God in Christ.

There is an even more disturbing inclusiveness about this rule. True, it is given to Christians but the Christian is not free to obey this rule within his relationship to his friends or family only. This rule applies in all our relationships. It includes people we like and people we do not like. Can you imagine the radical change in race relations if we were to begin applying this rule studiously to those of other races? Isn't it a shame that we have not tried to do so? Sit where the other man sits, walk a mile in his shoes, live a day in his life, and then begin to put this truly Golden Rule to work in your life. Christ will be living in and through you if you do. Once again the story of the Good Samaritan tells us that we can place no limits on when we will practice the Golden Rule.

You may find it helpful to put this in the negative. Don't do to others what you do not want them to do to you. Do you like to be snubbed and ill-treated by others? Of course not. Then don't you snub and ill-treat others. Do you like to be the subject of malicious gossip? Then don't engage in it. Do you appreciate people misunderstanding you? Then be careful about how you misunderstand others. We could compile a long list of don'ts, but each one needs to do that for himself.

Just in case you would be tempted to think that this is a very good sounding rule, but not really important, consider these words of Christ, "For this is the law and the prophets." If the law and the prophets are important, and they are, then this rule of life is important too. It is a capsule commentary on all that the New Testament teaches on human relations. Christ is telling us that this is the intention behind the things written in the Old Testament. Each of the laws tells us how this rule is to be applied in specific situations. Perhaps we can see a basic misunderstanding many have of the law of God at this point. The law was not primarily given to keep man from being bad; it was given as a guide into positive goodness. It is the pathway to true love and neighborliness toward our fellow man. Thus the Golden Rule may be said to be the law and the prophets. Take the Sixth Commandment or the Seventh as examples. In both cases the primary spirit behind them is the Golden Rule.

The question now comes up, how shall we, how can we obey this Golden Rule, this summary of the law and prophets. Let us return to an earlier quote, "Everyone praises the Golden Rule but no one practices it." This suggests something. Since all agree it is the right way to act, and since few really try to practice it, and none do so perfectly, it is obviously impossible to obey it. We know how much it could do for us all, but still it lies dormant in this potential. This law runs contrary to human nature. From our earliest years we are self-centered and self-concerned above all. It just goes against the grain to put aside our own interests and ego, and work hard at living by the Golden Rule. Something very drastic must happen to a person to alter basic human nature, and make him act contrary to the natural law of self-concern. A piece of wood tossed into a stream is going to drift with the current, not against it. It obeys natural law. So do we unless and until we become something more than just "natural people." That drastic thing is the new birth, whereby a new life principle is implanted in our hearts. This is the necessary beginning point for living by the Golden Rule. Men try to make of this a naturalistic, humanistic religion, but it just cannot be done. How can a natural person live by a supernatural law? Having said this, we are still dealing with the realm of the possible. In the Christian faith, God does a supernatural thing in a person. He transforms that person into a new

kind of being. In Christ it really does become possible to live by this Golden Rule. This is what the new birth is all about.

You may well protest, "I know I am a Christian, but I still find it difficult to live this way." Of course you do. The Christian is not only a new creature in Christ, but unfortunately he still has very much of the old creature in him too. The classic illustration of this from the Bible is the condition of Israel after they had successfully invaded and conquered Canaan. The land was theirs, they had received it as a gift from God and they were there, but many parts of the land lay yet unconquered. There was still much land left to possess, even at the end of Joshua's brilliant career. That's the way it is in the Christian life. Salvation, the new life, is ours but much of the old remains. There are many unsubdued areas in your life.

However, the fact remains that the Christian not only should, but he can, live by and in this rule. His life may be thought of as growing and maturing in his desire and ability to live by the Golden Rule as well as the other rules of Christ. There are several things to keep in mind which will help us in our obedience to this law. First, we need to remember certain things about God. He is holy and completely pure and righteous. He has every right and reason to deal with us as sinners and condemn us forever, but He has not. The Psalmist says, "He has not dealt with us after our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquity." Our relationship to him is based upon His grace alone. Now apply this to your attitude and relationship to others, once you have become a child of God. You, too, are to practice grace. You, too, are to love even those who hate you. As we consider other people, we understand that they, like us, are sinful and only by the grace of God can we establish a relationship with them.

When we realize the full meaning of grace and its application to our relationships, both to God and to our fellow man, our attitudes change. We are able to put ourselves in others' shoes and walk their paths. Our judgments become less harsh and severe, our attitude more humble. Our praying becomes less selfish, and the Golden Rule now becomes a possibility and even a reality in daily living. When this is true, we are well on our way to living life as Christ taught us. We cannot emphasize too strongly that this can only be done as Christ Himself gives us new life and comes to live in and through us. There is no other way to obey the divine imperative of the Golden Rule.

The Golden Rule is not an option for the people of God. It is not something for you to make up your mind to do today and then forget tomorrow because you do not feel well. This really is descriptive of the way a Christian thinks and lives. It is a part of our basic nature as believers. First, we settle the matter of our relationship to the Lord. Through the new birth we are given new lives. Following this, we must be willing to base all our relationships to others on our relationship to the Lord and our new life in Christ. Then we set out to live by this rule. We know that we shall one day face judgment, and our obedience to this rule will come up for consideration. Since this is true, let us keep right on praising the Golden Rule and begin diligently to apply it in actual practice.

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

1. In what areas of your life have you tried to practice the Golden Rule?
2. Is obedience to this rule always rewarded by men?
3. What are the two greatest Commandments?
4. Are there any Old Testament equivalents to the Golden Rule?

## **WALKING THE NARROW WAY**

### **MATTHEW 7:13-14**

The picture presented in the Sermon on the Mount as it draws toward its conclusion is one that becomes more and more dominated with the idea of judgment. No more skillful word artist ever painted a picture than that which is before us in these concluding scenes. At this point the hearer, and the reader, become involved in a very personal way in the words of Christ. As soon as these words are read or heard, one ceases to be a casual observer, and finds himself caught up in a personal crisis of decision. He calls for decision and challenges us to either become doers of His words or to cease pretending. The call is to enter the strait (hard) gate and to walk the narrow way.

The scene is a striking one. We see a great crowd of people, the whole of the human race walking along a way. As they move along in a great river of humanity, they are confronted with a fork in the road, at which are two gates. These gates lead to two different roads, and all must choose to enter one or the other, and to walk one of the two ways. However, there appears to be a vast difference between the two choices. To enter one of the gates, the people have but to continue along the way they have been walking with the great crowds, but to enter the other, one at a time must break away, make a deliberate choice, endure the jeers and taunts of the crowd he leaves behind, and go alone through the gate, and walk the road apparently alone or with a few scattered companions. It is very important to realize that in either case each individual is making a personal choice, though it may not appear so for those who choose the first of the two gates and roads. This is not a scene we may view from afar; we must walk the road and make the choice also.

Jesus said, "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few. "

The time has come for a closer look at the gates and the ways which lie before us. First, there comes the wide and easy gate through which the vast throngs of the world are passing onto the broad way. This is the natural way of life in which a person is primarily concerned with self and his own place in the world. To enter this gate and to walk this way involves no deliberate choice since it is the easy, natural thing to do. Those who walk this way are dominated by materialism and natural desire. It is the way which seems right to a man but the end there of are the ways of death.

The strait gate and the narrow way present an entirely different way of life. The gate is strait (hard, narrow), the way narrow and difficult. Entrance through this gate is one at a time. There is room for no more. It requires a deliberate, considered choice. Christ said, "Few there be that find it." This would indicate that it is no light or casual matter to enter this gate. Here a person has a change of heart, life, attitude and action. We cannot bring a load of self-righteousness or self-satisfaction through this gate. We must enter as poor in spirit, mourning because of our lostness and sin. Pride remains outside the gate for only the meek may enter. We may carry a description of the gate a bit further and notice that it appears as the shape of a cross, and going through that gate really means the cross, a dying to self and a living in and to Christ. There is no other way by which one may enter the Kingdom. Let me carry you back in thought to the dawn of the human race. When our first

parents were expelled from the garden of God, they found the entrance to the garden guarded by an angel with a fiery sword. Surely this is symbolic of the fact that sinful man may not come into the presence of God, unless God Himself provides a way. This He has done in Christ, but only through Him. Come and walk the way which leads to life, but be sure you have entered by the strait gate or else you are on the wrong way.

What is this way? Christ called it the narrow way. We don't like the word narrow. We associate it with narrow-mindedness, yet there is a sense in which the Christian is called upon to be narrow-minded. This does not mean he is to be bigoted or stupid, but narrow in the sense that he has one goal in life, the Kingdom of God. The narrow way of Christ is a difficult way of life. It involves hardship, self-sacrifice, obedience, courage, dedication, willingness to suffer to achieve a level of life above most. It involves fierce spiritual battles and temptation, for everything within the natural, human heart rebels against this way of life.

Those who walk this stony path seem happy and at peace. They know real joy and lasting satisfaction. They may appear to be alone, but on a closer look it is revealed that they form a fellowship, relatively few in number, but close and dear. There is also the presence of One who first walked this way. He has promised to be with them. They are not comfortless or alone. To fully understand this way, we look at it in light of what Jesus has already said about living the Christian life in this world. We discover that those who walk this way are the lights of the world, the salt of the earth. They are in this world but not of the world. They must deal with the world as it is, but they are captives to none save Christ.

There are two distinct bands of people presented to us in this scene. The crowds on the broad way and those on the narrow. What crowds there are who walk the broad way. Here are the well-known and the mighty and great people of this world. This way of life is extolled as the good life by those who walk it. They bitterly resent those who will not walk with them. This is the "in" crowd; these people are really "with it". It is a very crowded way, though one can also sense the loneliness and estrangement of those who walk it. For these people who put self at the center and who live for self, loneliness is the price they pay. There are all the noises and sights of great gaiety and fun, but beneath the veneer there is much sadness and great fear.

For the most part, those on the narrow way are the unknown and the unsung of the world. Not many wise or many great are chosen, we are told. They are frowned upon as being out of touch and old-fashioned. They are hated because their lives show up the emptiness and evil of unredeemed lives. But these folks on the narrow way have discovered a secret; they know the hard path they have chosen leads to better things. The path itself is not endless, and they will not walk the way of the cross forever. They follow an unseen but trusted guide whom, not having seen, they love with joy unspeakable and full of glory. They do not return the hostile feelings of the crowds on the broad way. They feel compassion and pity. They attempt to persuade them to leave the road they are on and enter the strait gate and walk with them the narrow way. To this call some respond and find themselves in a company of love and service. Life for these is no longer empty and dark. While others who hear the call revile and speak evil of and persecute even those who would save them from their fate.

What is the destination toward which the two ways lead? The broad way, so attractive to human eye and mind, surely this one must lead in the right direction. It seems so right; it must be the one to follow. If there were no end to this way, perhaps it would be the right one, maybe we would be fools not to take this way. But there is an end. It does reach a destination. Where? Jesus said it led to destruction,

to ruin and eternal loss, and the sobering words of Scripture tell us, "...and those who enter by it are many." These words alone are enough to warn us, but if we read them in context with the many other words of Jesus which treat with the same subject, they take on even more meaning and seriousness. He spoke of being cast out into outer darkness, of weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. Who among us would dare accuse Him of being fanatical, or of being improper in His choice of words? The parables He told of the fate of those who reject His light and His way are not to be ignored or rationalized away.

The narrow way has also an end. The closer we come to the end of this way, the brighter shines the light at the end. This is the way that leads to life, abundant and eternal. This is the path which brings us into the presence of God where we shall know even as we are known, where we shall see Him face to face whom we have seen only darkly before. The faint suggestions of joy and peace and contentment we experience in this world will give way to the glorious realities of fullness forever.

Even as the two ways differ, so their destinations differ, vastly. What a contract indeed! The Christian comes to the end of the narrow way, perhaps even battered and bruised from its ruggedness, bloody from persecution, saddened by rejection. Now he will be surprised by joy beyond his wildest imagination. He will say to himself, "Yes, of course, this is what it is; this is the end of it all." All the haunting memories of little sips of joy he has known, and for which he has longed, will be recaptured in a burst of perfection. Above all, the Lord will be there and "We shall be like Him! For we shall see Him as He is."

This is an incredible picture Christ has painted for us, a living picture with real people. Again let me say that it must not be viewed in a detached philosophical way, as from afar, but as those who walk these paths. If we will do this, we come to the inescapable conclusion that we are now on one or the other of these two ways. Realizing what is at stake in the question, we honestly and openly ask, "Which one am I on now?" As we shall see later, it is very easy to delude one's self at this point and be reassured, when in fact we should not be. We remember that it is both natural and convenient to be on the broad and easy way which leads to death, and it is demanding and difficult to be on the narrow way which leads to life. One cannot walk the narrow way which leads to life without first making the commitment of personal surrender to the saving Lordship of Jesus Christ.

From experience and from Scripture, we will know that those who choose the strait gate and narrow way will be by no means perfect. They will stumble, fall and fail. But ever they turn their faces toward God, confessing their sins and claiming His promises to forgive and cleanse. At times they will closely resemble in conduct and attitude those who walk the broad way. However, they will not be like them, for the living Christ in them will overcome and be victorious in varying degrees, depending upon their faith and obedience to Him.

These words of our Lord concerning the strait gate and narrow way should lead us to humble, careful, and prayerful self-examination. Which road are we walking right now? Have we missed the gate and are we walking in self-deception?

One of the most commonly used words in these days is the word "hypocrite" or "hypocritical." The young think the old are hypocrites, and the old are very sure that the young are hypocritical. The same is true of black and white, conservative and liberal. Of course, this is a valid accusation, for this is a basic part of human nature. We all would much prefer that others think that we are better than we really are.

However, when Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord', shall enter the kingdom of heaven," He was warning us against a very real and deadly spiritual

pitfall, self-deception. He was not warning us against open and recognizable hypocrisy at this point. Certainly obvious hypocrisy is a blemish on the Church, but there is nothing particularly subtle or dangerous about it, because everyone can recognize such a person and such behavior for what it is.

The purpose of this warning from Christ is that there may be some, even many, on the broad way of death who have closed their eyes to reality, and have deceived themselves into thinking that they are really on the right road. Jesus spoke these words with the authority of one who knew human nature better than anyone who has ever lived, and one who knew the future exactly and precisely. He was in no sense of the word attempting to scare people into heaven, as some might claim, but He was very simply and very compassionately telling what He knew was going to take place in the future. It was not and is not His desire to see any man lost for eternity, but He will not, and indeed cannot, treat men as if they were puppets.

Let's really try then to understand what He was talking about.

First, we must raise the question, "What are the reasons for self-deception?" The Lord began this passage by saying, "Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravening wolves." So perhaps the first reason why so many are deceived is because of false prophets. In this day of easy-going toleration of all things, even those things which would destroy us, it probably makes the average person nervous and even annoyed to mention the term "false prophets". It sounds too much like a witch hunt. Most of us, if we think of it at all, probably have a mental image of a false prophet, or a wolf in sheep's clothing, as being something of a comic book character, or a refugee from a horror movie. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Lord warned us that the false prophet would actually be very hard to recognize. He would look, act and sound like the real thing, and would mislead many people. As he used the term here, a false prophet is one who denies the need of walking through the strait (hard) gate, and on the narrow way. He would mislead people into thinking that anything goes: "You can have your cake and eat it too." He would lead people to believe that there is really no absolute standard of right and wrong, but rather that one must decide for himself what is good and bad. In these ways people would be led to think that being a follower of Christ is a rather easy thing and that anyone can do it. This way people are lulled into false security and become unconscious hypocrites.

Another reason for self-deception is our ability for and our tendency toward selective listening. Any mother knows about this. She can mention in a conversational voice that there is something good to eat and her children come running from everywhere to get in on the goodies. On the other hand, she can call in her loudest voice and with her most urgent tones that there is work to do and children within ten feet will not even budge. This is how so many react to the Word of God. We love to repeat, "The Lord is my shepherd..." but we refuse to hear our Good Shepherd when He says, "If any man will follow me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Another question which presents itself to us is "What are the signs of self-deception?" What then? Are we to spend all our lives in doubt and fear not knowing until the Day of Judgment whether or not we have trod the path to eternal life? Although that day will come as a great surprise and a horrifying disappointment to many, it need not be so. We can know if we will truly, openly and honestly examine ourselves by the light of God's Word. Let me suggest a few basic questions which might help you to understand your personal situation with God.

- a. Is my Christian life simply a matter of a few minor additions which really amount to very little, or is there something basically different about me

and the man who has no faith? (Not that you are perfect or even near it, but there really is a difference with a Christian.)

- b. Does my life reflect the fruits of the Spirit (love, joy, peace ... Gal. 5:22)?
- c. Am I growing in holiness, becoming more like Christ?
- d. Do I love what He loves and hate what He hates (Gal. 5:19-25; 2 Cor. 5:17)? Do I share Christ consistently with friends and neighbors (2 Cor. 5:20)?
- e. Am I gladly active in Christian service (Psalm 100)?
- f. Do I yearn to be with Christ (2 Cor. 5:1-8)?

We know that one one's life fulfills these tests perfectly, but is you examine the pattern of your life in the light of these verses, does it bring assurance or doubt concerning your relationship with Christ? Your eternal destiny is at stake; do not deceive yourself any longer. If this examination has revealed that you do not know Christ, why not invite Him to come into your life and begin to make it new?

#### **FOR FURTHER STUDY**

1. Why is the "gate" to eternal life "strait" and "hard"?
2. Is there anything in Christ's teaching to justify a belief in universalism?
3. Find and read several passages in the Gospels which tell us of the last judgment.
4. Is assurance of salvation possible? Find appropriate Scripture to show why or why not.
5. In what ways do we validate our Baptism (assuming you were baptized in infancy)?
6. Define "false prophet." Cite at least one example in the Old Testament.



## **WHEN THE FOUNDATIONS ARE TESTED**

### **MATTHEW 7:24-29**

The final words of Christ's great sermon are in the form of a parable or illustration. This is as it should be for He was the Master of the use of parables. Much of His teaching ministry was in the form of parables. These words are also a strong call for commitment. If any one thing stands out in His teaching, it is His constant call for personal commitment to the truth He reveals. I doubt if those who listened to Christ that day were aware that they had just heard the greatest sermon which would ever be preached, but at least one man took detailed and careful notes on what He said. That would be Matthew, the erstwhile tax official, who was trained and experienced in keeping meticulously careful and detailed records. God uses our gifts and our skills often in the most unexpected ways to serve Him. If for no other reason, Christ's call to Matthew was proven to be a wise one. What a pity it would have been if no one had recorded the words of Christ on the mountain.

In this closing story, Christ told of two men who built two houses, probably very much alike except in one important detail, the foundation. They built their houses for the same purpose, shelter and protection. Later they would face the same testings. At the end of the story one house still stands, its builder in safety. The other was in complete ruins, its builder dead. Jesus said He would compare these two men and their homes to all who would hear His words (the Sermon on the Mount especially.)

The final movement in the course of this sermon began with Chapter 7 and rushes toward its dramatic climax in these verses. The theme is judgment. Christ would never let His disciples forget, nor should we forget, the certainty, the inevitability of judgment. The intent of this parable is that the hearer, and reader, might reflect seriously on the way in which he lives his life, and how he has responded to God and His Word, and this reflection must take place before it is too late to profit by it.

We each should ask ourselves, "Is my house, my hope of acquittal in the judgment, my hope for eternity built on rock which endures, or sands which crumble?" We ask this realizing that far too often our faith fails the lesser tests and trials of this world, and we think, what will happen when we face the final test? The final test for the worth and meaning of your faith and religion comes at this point. What folly to practice religion at all if it does not meet the stern test suggested in this text. Let us more carefully examine this parable and ourselves in light of it.

First of all, we compare the two men involved. Although little is said of them, we may learn a great deal about them from the story. The first man wanted a house for the same reason all men want houses, a place of shelter, comfort and protection from the forces of nature. In the context of this sermon we would describe him as representing those who desire salvation, who want the blessing of God upon their lives. Who doesn't want this? But though he wants these things, he is unwilling to pay the price for them. He wants what God has to offer, but on his own terms. We know this cannot be. In the story of the rich young ruler, we find a young man who seemed to want what Christ alone could offer. He came to the right person with the right question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" In the end he went away sorrowing because he refused to meet God on God's terms. Jesus sorrowed over the young man more than he did over himself. Unless we meet God on His terms, we

cannot have Him as our Savior and our Father. No matter how elaborate our pretense of true faith may be, no matter how careful and correct we are in our forms of worship and our statement of creed if our house is built on the unstable sands of our own ideas and desires, it will not meet the test of God's judgment.

The second man is called a wise man by the Lord and wise he was. He too desired a house and for the same purpose as the first man. He represents those who want the gift of salvation and the blessing of God, and are willing to accept God on His terms. They realize they must enter the strait gate and walk the narrow way. They know there is no such thing as having your cake and eating it too. This man wants God as his God and Father. He hears the words of Christ and applies them personally. He becomes poor in spirit, he mourns, he is humbled, he hungers and thirsts after righteousness, he patterns his life after the teaching of the Lord. Thus he builds his house upon the strong enduring rock of Christ and His Word. In the final testing his house remains firm and strong though subjected to the same terrible storm as the first house which fell into ruin.

Both houses look very much alike. The foundation which is the real difference does not appear to the casual glance. If you are looking at houses just to admire them, you pay no attention to the foundation, but if you are thinking of buying one, then you look very carefully at the foundation. Too often we are tempted to think there really isn't too much difference between the child of God and the false confessor, and sadly enough this may be true in some cases. But the difference in the foundation is basic and real. According to Christ, the wheat and tares grow together until the time of harvest. It will take the righteous judgment of God to properly discern between His own true children and those who claim to be but are not. Remember again that both these houses were built for one purpose. In the final analysis, all religion has one purpose and one goal. Even the most casual and worldly person will be heard to say, "I sure hope old St. Peter lets me in the door, after all I'm no worse than a lot of so-called Christians." Underneath this flippant jest lies a deep anxiety about death and judgment. If your faith does not prepare and fit you for that day, it is worse than useless. The house that does not stand the test of the rains and floods fails in its purpose.

The foundation upon which the house rests is the most important part of the building. When the rains descended and the floods came, it was the only thing that really counted. Therefore, we must make very sure we know what that good foundation is and that we have indeed built upon it. This is the most important consideration in your life. As you think about and read these words, this could well be the most important moment of your entire life.

It would be easy to say that the foundation is faith in Christ and let it go at that. This would be perfectly true if only we fully understood what all is involved in faith in Christ. It obviously involves a great deal more than many seem to suspect. One gets the very uncomfortable feeling that many feel that just believing that Christ is the Son of God and that He died on the cross means salvation. This is not true. The whole point of the Sermon on the Mount, beginning with the Beatitudes and continuing through this story of the two men and two houses, is to tell us the meaning of faith in Christ. We come to Christ with a deep sense of need, despairing of finding any solutions apart from Him. We hear His call, we obey His Word. We deeply repent of sin, and seek after that holiness without which no man shall see the Lord. The living Christ takes up His abode in our lives, and we become new creatures in Him. Faith that saves, faith that is real is much, much more than mental or even emotional assent to truth. As Jesus defined saving faith, it is acceptance of Him and obedience to Him.

Finally, we look at the fate of the two houses and the two men in this story. The first house appeared to be in good order. For a while, all was well but when at last there came a time of testing and trial, the unworthiness of the house was revealed, as well as the folly of him who built it. The rains descended, the floods came, the winds blew and beat upon that house and it fell. Great and terrible was the fall thereof. It was utterly destroyed because it was utterly worthless to serve its intended purpose. It did not offer security and safety. When the terrible storms came at last, it would not protect those who depended upon it for protection. Thus they perished.

The second house also had its time of testing. The same rains descended and the floods came and the same wind blew upon that house/ just as vehemently as upon the first house. There the similarity ends. This house stood the test and braved the storm, providing for its owner protection, safety and security was its true worth revealed and the wisdom of the builder displayed for all to see.

Although we may and often do undergo testing and trials in this life, Christ was not thinking about these lesser tests when He told this final story. He was clearly referring to the one great final test of the judgment of God. It may be well to note that the fall of the first house was a tragedy which was irrevocable. At the same time, it is reassuring to realize that when the second house stood the tests and storms, there is a suggestion of permanence about that stand.

Even as we found ourselves walking on one of the two ways in the previous parable, so now we discover that Christ was placing us in this latter parable. He was talking about us when He spoke of the two men and the two houses. He would have us know that we are living in either of the two houses. He would also have us know that each of us will one day experience the rains and floods, the violent storms of judgment which beat upon these houses. What will be said of your house? Will it be written, "And it fell, and great was the fall thereof"? Or will it be written, "And it stood, for it was founded upon the rock"? In the words of St. Paul, "So let a man examine himself."

So at long last our journey through Christ's Sermon on the Mount is over. We have tried to see in this sermon how to live as Jesus taught us. We have seen His description and definition of a Christian, and His description of the Christian's life in this world. We do not presume to have exhausted the meaning of His Words, but only to have been suggestive so that you will study these things for yourself. Nor do we claim infallibility in our interpretation. None can claim this. However, if this study has served as a beginning, as a sort of pump primer, then it will have met and exceeded the expectation of the writer. The study on a regular, constant basis of this sermon will be immense value to the earnest Christian, but never forget Jesus put a premium on doing His Words and not just hearing them.

For a closing thought, let us lift the words of Jesus as recorded in the Book of Revelation out of their setting and apply them to our own hearts. When He sent the messages to the seven churches, He ended each admonition to the several churches with these words. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Even so, Lord Jesus. Amen.

### **FOR FURTHER STUDY**

1. What is the ultimate aim of all religion?
2. Describe what you think constitutes a "good foundation" for the Christian life.
3. Describe and define a Christian in your own words.
4. Which truth in the Sermon on the Mount has spoken to your heart most deeply?