



# HAPPY TO BE NOBODY

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Catalog No. 1079

Matthew 5:1-3

First Message

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Last week I spent time gathering old photographs and other memorabilia from my Junior High days in preparation for teaching our Junior High students during the middle hour this morning. As I browsed through my keepsakes, I was struck by two things. First, I see that I'm getting old, and second, the things that used to enthrall me are no longer important to me. Once I thought being successful was a goal worth striving for, but not anymore.

In my search through my childhood mementos I thought of the children's story *The Velveteen Rabbit*, the tale of a toy rabbit who wanted to be more than just a toy sitting on a shelf. I enjoy children's literature. Many of the stories that we read to our children have great messages for adults, too. As this toy rabbit struggled with his uneasy feelings, he had a talk with an old, worn out, much loved stuffed horse. Their conversation is appropriate to the topic we are going to look at this morning:

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?" "Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real." "Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit. "Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt." "Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?" "It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

In many ways, discipleship is the process of "becoming real." And that does indeed take a long time.

For the past twelve months I have immersed myself in chapters 5, 6 and 7 of the book of Matthew, a passage commonly referred to as the Sermon on the Mount. During his three years of ministry our Lord gave three major addresses: the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24-25),

the Upper Room Discourse (John 13-17), and the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7).

The Sermon on the Mount is probably the best known of the teachings of Jesus—and probably the least obeyed. These words, which are Jesus' description of what he wanted his followers to be and do, are the nearest thing to a manifesto that he ever uttered. The Sermon on the Mount is the best explanation, and the clearest illustration, of what true Christianity is all about.

Christians desperately need to know the difference between true Christianity and the counterfeits that are so prevalent today. One man writes: "We live in a day when image rates higher than character, when style counts more than real accomplishment. We are impressed with outward appearances. We are easily distracted from unspectacular disciplines that lead to excellence. Life is skimmed from the surface. The depths remain largely unexplored."

If you don't believe that, watch the election campaign in the coming months. We will be bombarded with sound bites and visual images crowing about values and priorities, and the platforms and philosophies of the two major parties.

The Sermon on the Mount, by contrast, is Jesus' philosophy of life, delivered at a time when his popularity was soaring. This was his unveiling of his new platform, not the inauguration of a new political party, but the ushering in of the kingdom of God.

I had intended to take two weeks on the opening verses of the sermon, known as the beatitudes, and then proceed through the rest of chapter 5 on the following six Sundays. But as I have thought and prayed about this series, I have been encouraged to slow down and devote the entire series to the beatitudes alone.

We are so used to hearing these beatitudes that we almost take them for granted. We fail to see how utterly unorthodox they are. The people who first heard Jesus' words were quite ordinary folk, just like you and me. They were hard nosed Jewish businessman, battle-scarred Roman soldiers, common fishermen and laborers. Jesus' words would have seemed just as radical to them as they do to us, for the beatitudes neatly contrast how to succeed in the kingdom of heaven as opposed to the kingdom of this world.

A. W. Tozer in his excellent work *The Pursuit of God*, writes: "A fairly accurate description of the human race might be furnished, when unacquainted with it, by tak-

ing the beatitudes, turning them wrong side out, and saying, 'Here is your human race.'"

I thought I would try that, so here is modern secular man's version of the beatitudes:

Blessed are self-made and the self-sufficient, because they did it all by themselves.

Blessed are those who play it cool, because they avoid being hassled by life.

Blessed are those who demand their rights, because if they don't, someone else will.

Blessed are those who go for all the gusto, because you only go around once.

Blessed are those who show no mercy, because anyone dumb enough to get caught deserves it.

Blessed are those who bend the rules, because after all, everyone is doing it.

Blessed are those who intimidate others, because if you don't, someone else will grab your chips.

Blessed are those who despise the good, because everyone knows that good guys finish last.

Happily, not everyone in modern society would describe their philosophy of life in those terms. But many would. And even many of those who would shy away from admitting it still live that way. Modern society lives by the rules of the survival of the fittest. The bumper sticker says it all: "The one who dies with the most toys wins."

Some time ago, the owner of the Chicago Bulls made this statement when Michael Jordan first retired: "He's living the American Dream. The American Dream is to reach a point in your life where you don't have to do anything you don't want to do and can do anything that you want to do." That may be some people's American Dream, but it is certainly not Jesus' dream as revealed here in the beatitudes. These verses tell us that God sees the world through a very different lens.

In light of that, let us look at Jesus' words in Matthew 5

**And when He saw the multitudes, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. And opening His mouth He began to teach them, saying, ... (Matt 5:1-2, NASB)**

I will make four general observations about the beatitudes before we look at them in detail.

There are eight beatitudes in all, found in verses 3-10 of chapter 5. Verses 11-12 are not additional beatitudes. They are merely an expansion of the eighth, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness." Some people seek to equate what they regard as ten beatitudes with the Ten Commandments. Although Matthew is drawing a parallel between Jesus and Moses, and we could make much of that correlation, it was not Jesus' intention to give ten laws. In fact,

these expressions are not laws at all; they are characteristics of citizens of the kingdom of heaven. In other words, this is the lifestyle of those who are subject to the King. We don't do these things to get into the kingdom. Rather, they are a manifestation of the fact that we have already submitted our lives to the lordship of Christ.

The second thing I would say is that these expressions are not platitudes. They are not pious, wishful statements. Jesus is not saying, "I wish this is the way the world really was. I wish this is how people behaved." No, this is reality. This is the way we can be and will be when we are subject to the King.

Third, the people who exhibit these qualities are not an elitist set, a small spiritual aristocracy remote from common Christians. On the contrary, all eight of these qualities are to characterize every believer. They are Christ's specifications for what every Christian ought to be. Just as the nine-fold fruit of the Spirit which Paul lists is to ripen every Christian character, so the eight beatitudes of which Christ speaks describe our Lord's ideal for every citizen of God's kingdom.

Finally, a comment on the promises attached to each beatitude. Each one opens with the word, "Blessed." It is important to understand what that means. The term can and does mean "happy." Many commentators have explained the beatitudes as Jesus' prescription for human happiness. It is true that living like this will ultimately satisfy us. After all, no one knows better than our Creator how to become truly human. He made us, and knows how we work.

However, we need to be careful to not take this word "happy" to mean the subjective feeling of happiness we usually refer to when we use that word. Here, Jesus is not merely declaring how people feel, he is making an objective statement about what God thinks of them. To be blessed is to be approved of God. Blessedness is not simply a nice wish from God. It is a pronouncement of what we actually are, and that is, approved! It is because of God's approval that Christians are blessed. And just as the eight qualities belong to every Christian, the eight blessings do as well. These are the privileges that come with being a citizen of God's kingdom.

The first of the beatitudes is found in verse 3:

**"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."**

Eugene Peterson has rendered this beatitude this way: "You're blessed when you are at the end of your rope. With less of you, there is more of God and his rule." One translation puts it: "Blessed are the desperate." This beatitude has to do with our attitude toward ourselves. This is where it all begins. A Christian is a person who has declared spiritual bankruptcy, one who understands that spiritually, his need is not partial, but total.

That is why we must recognize that the Christian life

is not just difficult, it is impossible. It is a supernatural life. Christians are people who in their spirit feel needy—and are willing to admit it. The opposite of poor in spirit is self sufficiency—that indispensable characteristic of our society. So when a person becomes a Christian, he comes to the place where he recognizes that he is totally inadequate. As the hymn writer put it, “Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to Thy Cross I cling.”

The word translated “poor” merely means to be dependent. It is used in the same way that we use the word “dependent” when we fill out our income tax forms to refer to those who are supported by us. So the man who is poor in spirit is one who is dependent on someone else. He sees that he needs to rely and believe in someone other than himself. That “someone,” of course, is the King. The one who is poor has submitted himself to the lordship of Jesus Christ and is content to be dependent on God. It is foolish to believe that we are independent men and women. It doesn’t take much, either physically or financially, to bring us down. It is folly for us to say, “I don’t need anybody but myself.” But that’s what we do.

A while back I came across an article entitled the “The Art of Being a Big Shot,” by Howard Butts. This man writes:

It is my pride that makes me independent of God. It is appealing to me to feel that I am the master of my fate, that I run my own life, call my own shots, and go it alone. But that feeling is my basic dishonesty. I can’t go it alone. I have to get help from other people. I can’t ultimately rely on myself. I am dependent on God for my very next breath. It is dishonest of me to pretend that I am anything but a man, small, weak, and limited. So living independent of God is self-delusion. It is not just a matter of pride being an unfortunate little trait and humility being an attractive little virtue. It is my inner psychological integrity that is at stake. When I am conceited, I am lying to myself about what I am. I am pretending to be God and not man. My pride is the idolatrous worship of myself, the national religion of hell.

So the mark of people who are in the kingdom of God is that they are dependent on Another. They have placed their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord instead of believing in themselves or some other resource.

And the result is that they have everything. That is the strange paradox of Christian living. When we give up everything, we have everything. Jesus says that when we are poor in spirit, if we recognize our poverty, then ours is the kingdom of heaven. We don’t have to wait for it. We have all the resources of God’s invisible realm. When we are weak, then we are strong. But as long as we think of ourselves as strong and competent and able, then we are truly weak. We have set aside the mighty resources of God and replaced them with our puny, ineffective humanity.

So that is where Jesus starts. The first step to joy is a plea for help, an acknowledgment of moral destitution, an admission of inward paucity. Those who taste God’s presence have declared spiritual bankruptcy and are aware of their spiritual crisis. Their cupboards are bare. Their pockets are empty. Their options have run out. They have long since stopped demanding justice; they are pleading for mercy.

That is why we see in the Scripture God’s partiality to the poor and the disadvantaged. It is not that God is stuck with the poor; he chooses them.

Why would God single out the poor for special attention over any other group? A writer named Monika Hellwig lists the following advantages to being poor:

1. The poor know they are in urgent need of redemption.
2. The poor know not only their dependence on God and on powerful people but also their interdependence with one another.
3. The poor rest their security not on things but on people.
4. The poor have no exaggerated sense of their importance and no exaggerated need of privacy.
5. The poor expect little from competition and much from cooperation.
6. The poor can distinguish between necessities and luxuries.
7. The poor can wait, because they have acquired a kind of dogged patience born of acknowledged dependence.
8. The fears of the poor are more realistic and less exaggerated, because they already know that one can survive great suffering and want.
9. When the poor have the gospel preached to them, it sounds like good news and not like a threat or a scolding.
10. The poor can respond to the call of the gospel with a certain abandonment and uncomplicated totality because they have so little to lose and are ready for anything.

Convicting stuff, isn’t it? Do we rest our security on things, not on people? Do we have an exaggerated sense of our importance and an exaggerated need for privacy? Can we distinguish between necessities and luxuries? Does the gospel sound like good news to us, not a scolding?

Look at the kind of people who impress Jesus: a widow who places her last two cents in the offering; a dishonest tax collector so riddled with anxiety that he climbs a tree to get a better view of Jesus; a woman with a string of five unhappy marriages; a blind beggar, an adulteress, a man with leprosy. Strength, good looks, connections and a competitive instinct may bring success in our world, but those very qualities may block us from entering the kingdom of heaven.

Most of us are ordinary people. In the eyes of the world we are unimportant, insignificant and unnecessary. Few of us have clout. We're neither superstars nor super saints. But therein lies our strength! Paul put it this way: "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:10).

The apostle learned that in Damascus. He arrived in that city, thinking he was God's gift to his generation. He felt perfectly suited to evangelize the Jews. He was: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless (Phil 3). Paul was an Israelite indeed. He was the little engine that could!

So he tackled the things that couldn't be done, only to find that he couldn't do them! Instead of a revival, he precipitated a riot. The Christians in Damascus had to put him in a foul and stinking fish basket, lower him over the wall of the city and send him away, pleading with him not to return lest he undo all that God was doing.

What an embarrassment! It was the worst day of Paul's life—and the best! That was the day he learned that he was, as he later put it, "nobody." In time he became somebody. He tells us the process: "But we have this treasure (deity) in earthen vessels (humanity) to show us that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Cor 4:7). Deity in humanity. God in a jar. Paul carried about in his body the presence and the essence of God. So can we!

But it comes down to this: Every natural virtue, every endearing quality, every proclivity toward good comes from God. Without him we can do nothing. We must

not only accept our limits, we must love them! They are God's gift to us. It is the way we are. Nothing in us is a source of hope. Nothing in us is worth defending. Nothing in us is special and worth admiring.

I can say that the most profitable spiritual experiences in my life have come out of times of profound spiritual poverty. These were the times when God brought me face to face with my need in my marriage and in my ministry, times when I was left with no doubt that there was nothing in me to commend me to God. But, as we discover here in Jesus' words, times such as these can mark the beginning of life. The moment of our greatest shame can become the moment of our greatest glory. The moment of our deepest spiritual poverty can be the moment when we see clearer than ever before.

At that point we are faced with a choice. We can despair, and end it all, or we can open ourselves up to the wonderful grace of God. He loves you the way you are. He loves the wretch that you are so much that he gave his life for you. He allows us to fall not to shame us, but to assure us that though we are guilty, vile and helpless, we are deeply loved by him. It is his love in the face of our wickedness that awakens us to humility and contrition.

The psalmist says that God never despises a broken and contrite heart. At the moment of our exposure and brokenness we can drive our shame under ground, or we can be touched at our deepest level by God's amazing grace. Let him bring it to the light, and let him touch you and heal you. Today might be the day when you see yourself like others have seen you for a long time. I had to come to that realization myself. I had been fooling myself, but not others. I wouldn't let them tell me. To such, and only such, the kingdom of heaven is given.

*"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*

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# HOLY TEARS

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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Matthew 5:4

Second Message

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Some years ago, Mike Wallace interviewed a survivor of the Auschwitz death camp on the television news show "60 Minutes." The man, Yehiel Dinur, had been a principal witness at the Nuremberg war crime trials. During the interview, a film clip was screened from the 1961 trial of Adolph Eichmann. It showed Dinur entering the courtroom and coming face to face with Eichmann for the first time since Dinur was sent to Auschwitz almost twenty years earlier.

On the film, Dinur stopped cold and began to sob uncontrollably; then he fainted. Wallace asked him what was going on inside him that caused such a reaction. Was he overcome with hatred? Was it fear, or horrid memories? Dinur said that it was none of these. He explained that all at once he realized that Eichmann was not the godlike officer who had sent so many to their deaths; this Eichmann was just an ordinary man. Dinar continued: "I was afraid about myself. I saw that I am capable to do this. I am...exactly like him."

Wallace's summation of Dinur's discovery, "Eichmann is in all of us," is a horrifying statement, but it captures the central truth about our nature. As a result of the fall, sin is in each of us. And it is not the just the susceptibility to sin, but sin itself.

In the face of everyday temptation we fall; we stumble voluntarily and repeatedly. The same old flaws and failures pursue us all our lives; new vices awaken and dominate us. We blunder again and again into bad judgment. Every now and then we set out to restore ourselves. We resolve to deal with our jealousy, our lust, to put an end to our self-pity, defensiveness, self-indulgence and all of the other expressions of self-love that separate us from God and from others. But, more often than not, our periodic brushes with morality fade with time, and no enduring changes result. Sin remains our sullen master. We may try to blame bad genes or dysfunctional families, but in the end, we have to admit that no one has to push us into wrongdoing; we go all by ourselves.

Theologians have terms for this syndrome. They talk about "original sin," and "total depravity." "Original" sin does not mean that we sin in novel, creative ways. There aren't any innovative ways to sin; it has all been done before. Original sin simply means that we are sinful in our origins. We come into the world with a proclivity toward sin. We are a like a baseball with a spin on it. Sooner or later we break, and the break is always down and out. "Total depravity" means that sin affects

our total being. If sin were blue, we would be a shade of blue all over.

There is something in our makeup that is dreadfully wrong, something that causes us to do evil. Even when we try not to do wrong, sin makes it impossible for us not to think about doing it.

But we don't need to be told we are defective. We know what we are like; we need only to be reminded of it. We don't want to expose that side of ourselves to others, but God has a way of not allowing us to keep it hidden. He permits us to do the most embarrassing things at the most inopportune times. He allows us to experience the depths of our depravity, to see the miserable stuff of which we are made.

Sin is an atrocity. We have to realize how monstrous and scandalous sin is, and how desperately we need God's forgiveness. We will never appreciate the magnitude of God's acceptance until we comprehend the measure of our sins. It is at the point of depressing failure that we hunger for grace.

That is why Jesus began his great Sermon on the Mount with the words that we looked at last week: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit.*" Or as one translation puts it: "Blessed are the desperate!" This first beatitude has to do with our attitude toward ourselves. Simply put, a Christian is a person who has declared spiritual bankruptcy. He is man or woman who understands that spiritually his or her need is not partial, it is total. A Christian is one who in his spirit, feels his need, and is willing to admit it. He is not self-sufficient. He has submitted himself to the lordship of Jesus Christ and is content to be dependent on God.

Today we come to the second beatitude. As we will see, it is closely related to the first. In fact, these first two beatitudes work as a pair. Matthew 5:4:

**"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."** (NASB)

These words of Jesus have to do with our attitude toward sin. They speak of personal grief with respect to personal sin. Mourning is the emotional counterpart to understanding that we are poor in spirit. This is the second stage of spiritual blessing. It is one thing to be spiritually poor and acknowledge it; it is another to grieve and mourn over it. Or to put it in theological terms, confession is one thing; contrition is another. When we see ourselves for what we are, our emotions will be stirred to mourning.



Right away we have to point out that Jesus is not saying, “Blessed are the grim, perpetually down, morose, cheerless Christians.” He does not mean that Christians are to be morbid and joyless. Humor and laughter are wonderful gifts—and very necessary to life. Solomon says, “a merry heart acts like good medicine.” No, Jesus is not talking about an individual whose face looks like it should be the frontispiece to the Book of Lamentations. He is not talking about those who believe that in order to be spiritual, they have to be miserable.

But we are not to avoid our sorrow, either. Life is not one big party. We should take it seriously. We are not playing life for nickels and dimes. We should be moved by the hard facts of life. The people to whom Jesus was speaking were in desperate straits. They were living in grinding poverty. They had seen one oppressor after another march across their land. They were a humiliated people. For them, life was tough and hard.

It still is today. We can’t deny that. Life *is* hard. There are things that cause us to mourn, weep, and be sorrowful. It is foolish to try and escape the hard facts of life. And becoming a Christian doesn’t erase those hard facts. The Christian life is not all joy and laughter. Some Christians believe that if they are filled with the Holy Spirit they must always have a grin on their faces and be bubbly all the time. But there is such a thing as Christian tears. It would be good if more of us knew about them.

This word for “mourning” is the strongest word that Matthew could have chosen. It means “passionate lament.” It is a rare thing today to find anyone who passionately laments over his sins. This word speaks of the sorrow of a broken heart, of a passionate spirit of contrition. This is how the apostle Paul felt when he cried out in Romans 7: “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” Paul was weary of stating the truth and living wrong. He was a struggler in the pursuit of righteousness.

Jesus, too, knew sorrow. The book of Isaiah says that he was a “man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” He wept over the sin of others. He wept openly at the tomb of Lazarus. He wept over the remorseless city of Jerusalem that would not receive him. He grieved over sin’s bitter consequences in judgment and death.

There is something quite basic about mourning. The word Matthew uses for mourn is a participle: *mourning*, implying that we are doing it now. It is not something that we have done or will do; it is always part of us. Sometimes it is not admitted, other times it is not faced, but it is always there. Mourning is part of our fallen humanity. We come into the world crying, and we leave it either crying or watching others around us crying. Mourning is basic to who we are. That is why Jesus calls attention to it and legitimizes it. It is not only all right, it is *blessed* to mourn.

We mourn because we have a keen sense of loss. We feel cut off. We have lost the womb—and things will

never be the same again. To put it theologically, we are “East of Eden.” We have been kicked out of the garden, banished from Paradise, and we are unable to make it back on our own. We are incomplete and damaged. But the fact that we know that and we feel that is evidence of a memory, an innate desire we feel inside for wholeness. We were designed to live in a better world than this. And until that better world comes along, we will groan for what we do not have. An aching soul is evidence not of neurosis or spiritual immaturity, but of the way things really are.

Animals, with the exception perhaps of domesticated dogs, don’t mourn; they are fine just the way they are. A bear does not feel cut off from some Grizzly Eden. But we have been cut off from our Eden. We sense this deep within, and our tears are a sign of this loss. We want wholeness, we don’t have it, and so we cry.

We puzzle over this, and we ask, How can this be good? It is “blessed” because we need God. That is our basic need. If we deny that, then we are really in trouble. The ability and the willingness to mourn is an admission of our lostness—but it is that very willingness that puts us in a place where we can be comforted. That is why it is blessed.

Eugene Peterson translates this verse this way: “You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.” But that is hard for us to admit. We go to such lengths to deny and avoid and pretend that there isn’t any loss. We come up with cheery band aids to cover our wounds. We take a pill or drug or alcohol to help ease the pain. We smile and try to give the impression that everything is under control. We see the attractive, smiling people gazing down on us from the billboards, and though we know that their products won’t make us happy, we are taken in because that is a lie that we are ready to embrace.

But we face loss at every hand. We lose our jobs, our health, our parents; we lose our children, one way or another. Our stocks fall, our retirement plans fail, our dreams go belly up. We labor long hours with fragmentary results. We’re disregarded and ignored, slandered and maligned; we get trampled on by insensitive people. Some days we fall flat on our faces. Our best efforts meet with disaster. We put our best foot forward only to meet with bitter embarrassment. And yet we suppress the evidence! We do so because being human means being vulnerable to God. Human is the one thing we have a chance of being, but we avoid that at all costs so that we can play at being God, (which we are no good at at all), trying to keep things under control, manipulating, calling the shots.

Life is hard. Life is difficult and demanding. As Ray Hobbess said in the movie, *The Natural*: “Life just didn’t turn out the way I thought it would.” It rarely does. But we don’t want to be vulnerable and have our pain and shame exposed. That is why there is so much denial of

pain and loss.

This beatitude is a call to stop hiding and come openly to God. He is the Father who ran to his prodigal son when the young man came limping home. God weeps over us when shame immobilizes us. Yet as soon as we feel that way, we run to cover. We use Adam and Eve as our role models, and we hide. Why? Because we do not like what we see. It is uncomfortable, even intolerable, to confront our true selves.

Simon Tugwell, in his book *The Beatitudes*, explains:

And so like runaway slaves, we either flee our own reality or manufacture a false self which is mostly admirable, mildly prepossessing, and superficially happy. We hide what we know or feel ourselves to be (which we assume to be unacceptable and unlovable) behind some kind of appearance which we hope will be more pleasing. We hide behind pretty faces which we put on for the benefit of our public. And in time we may come to forget that we are hiding, and think that our assumed pretty face is what we really look like.

But God loves who we really are—whether we like it or not. God calls us, as he did Adam, to come out of hiding. No amount of spiritual makeup can render us more presentable to him. As Merton said, “The reason we never enter into the deepest reality of our relationship with God is that we so seldom acknowledge our utter nothingness before him.”

And our recovery begins with shame. George MacDonald said: “to be ashamed is a holy and blessed thing. Shame is shame only to those who want to appear, not to those who want to be. Shame is shame to those who want to pass their examination, not to those who would get to the heart of things . . . To be humbly ashamed is to be plunged in the cleansing bath of truth.”

Those who mourn will be comforted by the only comfort which can relieve their distress, and that is, the free forgiveness of God.

Horatio Spafford knew about loss, pain, tears and comfort. He lived in Chicago at the turn of the century. He was a dynamic Christian man who was influential in the founding of the Moody Bible Institute. Following the great Chicago fire in 1871, he put his wife and children aboard ship and sent them to Europe. He wanted to get them out of the city while it was being rebuilt. As they were crossing the Atlantic Ocean, the ship was struck by another vessel and both ships sank. This mother saw her four children drown. She herself was struck by a falling mast, but she was miraculously saved. She fell on some floating debris and later was rescued and taken to Wales.

While she was in a hospital there, she telegraphed

back to her husband the two words: “Saved alone.” Horatio Spafford took the first ship to Wales. As it neared the area in the Atlantic where the other ship had gone down, Dr. Spafford was walking along the deck, contemplating all that had happened. It was then he was moved to write the song we are going to sing to close our service morning, *It Is Well With My Soul*:

*When peace like a river attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll;  
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

That is the message Jesus wants to communicate to us today. Whatever my circumstances, you have taught me to say, “It is well with my soul.” Joy is not the absence of suffering but the presence of God.

Perhaps you are wondering, “Why would God want me? He knows my sin, my wanderings, my long-standing habits of yielding.” And you think, “I’m not good enough. I’m not sorry enough for my sin. I’m not able to not sin.” You are right! Our waywardness doesn’t have to be explained to God. He sees everything about us at a single glance: what is, what could have been, what would have been apart from our choices.

But our sin and incorrigible weakness only draw out God’s love. It is his nature to love; he can do no other. “God is love” (1 Jn. 4:8). God’s love creates the only safe ground on which we can give up our search and surrender to him. He is the one, says Pascal, “before whom we can humble ourselves without despair.” What’s the use of holding out when we have found, or rather have been found, by the very thing we have been looking for all our lives—infinite love?

As one man has written:

Let not conscience make you linger,  
Nor of fitness fondly dream.  
All the fitness he requireth,  
Is to feel your need of him.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

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# TAMED BY GRACE

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Catalog No. 1081

Matthew 5:5

Third Message

Gary Vanderet

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G.K. Chesterton defined a paradox as "truth standing on its head, calling for attention." Certainly, this can be said of the teaching of Jesus: His words were salted with paradoxes. It was our Lord who said such things as: Giving is receiving; dying is living; losing is finding; least is greatest; poor is rich; weakness is strength, serving is ruling.

The beauty of a paradox is that it draws attention because it doesn't sound right to the ear. Nothing could be more true of the third beatitude of Jesus, to which we come this morning in our series on the Sermon on the Mount. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth," said Jesus. But isn't it the self-made, the self-sufficient, the intimidating who get everything on this earth? How are the meek going to inherit anything? Such thinking runs counter to the laws of nature and society. Look at the people who occupy the executive suites. They are the strong, the self-sufficient, the overbearing, the proud, the capable, the aggressive, the ambitious. Can there be any doubt that the world belongs to the John Waynes of society?

It was Rabbi Harold Kushner, watching his son die of progeria, an early aging disorder, who coined the phrase, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" But an equally perplexing question is, "Why do good things keep happening to bad people?" Some people get away with murder. They make their way through life fat, dumb and happy, and never seem to pay the consequences of their evil. Others can't get away with anything. Terrible, frustrating, costly things keep happening to them, and we wonder why.

Meekness is the last thing anyone wants to be known for in our world. But that is because we don't understand meekness at all. We need to say at once that meekness is not weakness, cowardice, timidity, or a desire for peace at any price. Meekness is not indecisiveness or a lack of confidence. It is not shyness, having a withdrawn personality, or niceness. Meekness is not sweetness. Clark Kent is not a good example of meekness. There was nothing mild about Jesus. In fact, he got quite angry at times.

The Greek term translated "meek," or "gentle," is very colorful. It is used in several ways in secular writing:

- A wild stallion that had been tamed and brought under control is described as being meek.
- Carefully chosen words that soothed strong emo-

tions are called meek words.

- Ointment that took the fever and sting out of a wound is called meek.
- In one of Plato's works, a child who asks a physician to be tender as he treats him uses this term.
- People who are polite, tactful and courteous and who treat others with respect, are called meek people.

So meekness includes such enviable qualities as having strength under control; being calm and peaceful in a heated atmosphere; emitting a soothing effect on people who may be angry or otherwise beside themselves, and displaying tact and courtesy that causes others to retain their dignity.

In the first two beatitudes, if poverty describes Christians' attitude toward themselves, and mourning their attitude toward sin, then meekness has to do with our attitude toward others. We are teachable, so we are not defensive when we are wronged.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says that meekness denotes a humble and gentle attitude toward others, determined by a true estimate of ourselves. He points out that it is comparatively easy to be honest with ourselves before God and acknowledge that we are sinners in his sight. He goes on:

But how much more difficult it is to allow *other people* to say things like that about me. I instinctively resent it. We all of us prefer to condemn ourselves than to allow somebody else to condemn us. In other words, I am not prepared to allow other people to think or speak of me what I have just acknowledged before God that I am. There is a basic hypocrisy here; there always is when meekness is absent. . . Meekness is essentially a true view of oneself, expressing itself in attitude and conduct with respect to others...The man who is truly meek is the one who is truly amazed that God and man can think of him as well as they do and treat him as well as they do. This makes him gentle, humble, sensitive, patient in all his dealings with others.

Meekness is a non-defensive position, a refusal to defend yourself and retaliate when you are unjustly accused.

Taking things into our own hands always makes matters worse. Of course, it is not wrong to defend the rights of others. Meekness is not standing by when other people's rights are trampled upon. Meekness is a re-



luctance to be quick to defend ourselves.

E. F. Finley writes:

True meekness is seen in those who with an acute sense of wrong, control the natural impulse to show anger and to retaliate, because in obedience to the will of God they accept provocation or wrong as discipline; and as opportunity for showing a spirit of patience and love. Meekness is the power of love to quell anger, to restrain a violent and hasty temper. The irritation may be keenly felt, the temptation to retaliate may be very strong, but love keeps the upper hand, and imposes discipline and self restraint.

So meekness involves a determination not to defend yourself when your rights are being taken away. What should you do? Let God defend you! Peter describes Jesus' actions in these words: "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." Jesus did not retaliate. He didn't answer back when he was unjustly accused. He took everything that was hurled at him, entrusting himself to the One who judges justly.

So, given the fact that we are not to retaliate, and that bad things keep happening to people who want to do what is right, what should our response be to the inequities of life? Jesus took this third beatitude from Psalm 37, a psalm written by David in his latter years: "I have been young, and now I am old" (verse 25). This is wisdom that has been tempered by time. Years of hard experience had given David insight, integrity and balance. He is looking back and reflecting on his experiences in the wilderness. In these verses we see the central elements that ought to govern our thinking as we brood over the inequities of life. David tells us what works when life does not.

The poet begins with two negative commands. First, he says, "Do not fret." Actually, the word "fret" is repeated three times in the first eleven verses:

**Do not fret because of evil men, (Ps 37:1, NIV)**  
**do not fret when men succeed in their ways, when**  
**they carry out their wicked schemes (7).**  
**do not fret—it leads only to evil (8).**

"Fret" means worry. But the word David uses here literally means "to get hot"—to get steamed, incensed. All these English words convey the idea of getting hot. That is what injustice does to us: it makes us mad; it bugs us. We don't like it when people misunderstand our intentions; when they misrepresent us; when they drag our names through the mud; when we give an honest day's labor and are not appreciated. Others pilage and cut corners, living for themselves, cheating and stealing and getting away with it. And that's not right. It should not be that way. It makes us mad. But,

David says, "Don't get mad"

Secondly, he says, "Don't be envious."

**Or be envious of those who do wrong; (1b)**

Don't be envious of wrongdoers. Envy is the sense of discontent we feel when we see the ungodly enjoying success. Unfortunately, most of our efforts to try and set things right in society are driven not so much by compassion as they are by envy and jealousy. We see evil people enjoying the good things of life—and we want them, too. If we don't get them, we feel short changed.

Don't envy the wicked, and don't get angry when evil people get away with wickedness.

David tells us why, in verse 2:

**For like the grass they will soon wither,**  
**Like green plants they will soon die away. (2)**  
**For evil men will be cut off, (9a)**

That verb "cut off" occurs frequently throughout this Psalm. It is one of David's major themes (verses 9, 22, 28-29, 34, 38). The opposite of being cut off is inheriting the land, or as Jesus expands it in the third beatitude, the "earth."

David uses a colorful metaphor in verses 35-36:

**I have seen a wicked and ruthless man**  
**Flourishing like a green tree in its native soil.**  
**But then I passed by and lo, he was no more;**  
**Though I looked for him, he could not be found.**

David sees a beautiful, luxuriant tree putting out fruit. But the next day it is gone. Someone has cut it down. That is what is going to happen to the wicked.

If people do not get what is coming to them in this life, at death they will face judgment. While we may see tyrants getting away with things, no one really gets away with anything. All in all, we live in a very fair world, *because death brings an end to everything*. The wicked *seem* to be flourishing; everything seems good about their lives, but then a coronary strikes and they are cut down. God has a way of taking care of those who seem to be getting away with evil. So don't get angry, and don't be envious.

There is a vivid contrast in the Psalm between those who are defenseless, and therefore are defended by God, and the arrogant, those who look out for themselves. The arrogant will be cut off; but those who wait for the Lord will inherit the land. So David says, why get angry and worked up over the evil of those who trample on us and misuse us? God has a way of dealing with evildoers. In time, they will be cut down, but the righteous will endure forever. This long range view gives us balance.

But the question remains, What about the here and now? How do we face evildoers? David responds with four positive commands, the first of which is in verse 3:

**Trust in the Lord and do good;**

### **Dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. (3)**

In Hebrew poetry, the second line intensifies the first and elaborates it. Here, the second line helps us understand what David means by “trust.” He is saying, settle down; dwell in the land; be content with your lot, and trust evildoers into God’s hand. We don’t have to redress all the evil in the world. Of course, we ought to do what we can when we see someone being oppressed; that is the response of Christian compassion. But we don’t have final responsibility to take ourselves out of the hands of evildoers.

That does not mean that we allow ourselves to be unnecessarily abused or misused by others. We can speak up and say it is not right to treat human beings that way. But when all is said and done, we must ultimately trust God to work out the final result. Then we don’t have to worry about it. We can safely put people in God’s hands and leave the outcome to him. That leaves us free to go about doing the right thing, knowing that God will deal with the fellow who is doing wrong.

Our natural tendency, however, is to want to set things right, to get the person who did wrong and make him pay for it. This is what happens in marriages. One spouse wrongs the other, sometimes grievously, and the wronged partner vows to get even. He or she withdraws conjugal rights, or pouts, to get back at the erring spouse. David says we should put the one who has wronged us in God’s hands. It is far better to say, “What you are doing is wrong, and you are answerable to God. But I am answerable to God, too, and I will do what is right, no matter what it costs me.” That is what David means when he says, “Trust in the Lord and do good.” He reinforces this later when he says, “Do not fret, it only leads to evildoing.” When we get angry, we are inclined to wrong people. But when we put people into God’s hands, and let him deal with them in his time and in his way, then we are free to be more charitable. We can be courteous, gentle and loving, because we know that God will deal with the matter.

There is nothing harder on our psyches than trying to redress all the wrongs in our lives and seeking to set things right. All that does is leave us with a bad feeling, a bad taste in our mouths. It takes away our joy. It is far better to put evildoers in God’s hands and go on about the business of doing what he has called us to do: Trust and obey.

David’s second positive command is in verse 4:

### **Delight yourself in the Lord; And he will give you the desires of your heart. (4)**

We can’t push anger out of our minds (at least, I can’t). We can only displace it. Instead of obsessing about the wrong that has been done to you, preoccupy yourself with what is good. “Delight yourself in the Lord,” says David. Taste, and see that he is good.

Have you ever delighted yourself in something sweet? Chocolate lovers know what I am talking about.

That is what we need to do with the Lord. Remind yourself of his goodness. Relish him. Ponder his mercy, his grace, his kindness toward you. “Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart,” says the psalmist. Certain of the desires that we have are legitimate, but joy and pleasure are simply by-products. When pursued directly, they elude us. All we can do is pursue things that we think will give us joy. At times, to our frustration, others take away the thing that we imagine will give us joy. But David is saying that if we delight in the Lord, if we relish him, if we hunger and thirst after him and taste his goodness, we will get the joy we sought.

Third, David says (verse 5):

### **Commit your way to the Lord; Trust in him and he will do this: (5)**

The word for “commit” here is actually the verb “to roll.” It means to roll something away. The picture is one of a heavy, onerous burden. And injustice is a heavy burden. It weighs us down, taxes our strength and tires us out. David’s advice is, roll all of that on the Lord. He can handle it. We can’t bear up under injustice in the world. It will always wear us out, and we will end up doing something evil in response. David says, take all of that and roll the weight of your anxiety on God. Peter agrees. “Cast all your care upon him because he cares about you,” says the apostle.

And finally, David says, “Rest in the Lord” (verse 7):

### **Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him.**

“Be still” means, be at rest, be tranquil. Compose your soul; settle your heart and wait. That word “wait” is interesting. It means to wait with longing. Hope encompasses the notion of expectancy, of longing for something. We must rest, and wait for God to work out his purposes. The writer of Hebrews says that it is through faith and patience that we inherit the promises. Trust and time are always factors.

But that’s hard, isn’t it? We want swift answers to our needs. But God is always working on a grander scale than our immediate needs. He has purposes in mind that we never envision. He is shaping us into the people that he intends us to be throughout eternity—and he uses present unpleasantness and long term injustice to accomplish that end. Our Lord himself, though he was a son, learned obedience through the things which he suffered.

Verse 11, the centerpiece of the Psalm, is where Jesus takes the beatitude from:

### **But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace. (11)**

Meekness is non-defensiveness. As a matter of fact, in most situations people are defenseless. But meekness is a refusal to defend ourselves. We can explain ourselves, but when all is said and done, we cannot really protect ourselves. All we can do is put ourselves in God’s hands and ask him to protect us. That is the meek man

who is being guarded by God: He doesn't defend himself.

David says the meek "will inherit the land." Jesus expands that statement to mean the whole "earth," not just that land of Canaan as David envisioned, but everything that God has in mind for us. Our "inheritance" is all the good things that are promised for us in our relationship with God.

There is a beautiful illustration of meekness in Genesis 13, the story of Abraham (or Abram as he was known then) and Lot. Abraham was enriched while he was in Egypt. His herds were so vast that the land could not sustain both flocks. We pick up the story in Genesis 13:7:

**And quarreling arose between Abram's herdsmen and the herdsmen of Lot. The Canaanites and Perizzites were also living in the land at that time.**

**So Abram said to Lot, "Let's not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left."**

**Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, toward Zoar. (This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east. (Gen 13:7-11, NIV)**

Lot "chose for himself." Remember that Abraham owned the whole land. He was the promised one. He had the covenant; he could have pulled rank; Lot was nothing more than a hitchhiking relative. And Abraham was the older man. He had the right to tell Lot to get lost. But he let Lot choose, and Lot "chose for himself." Abraham let God choose for him, and he got the whole thing. Lot lost everything in the end, while Abraham got everything. He inherited the land forever. Someone said, "Lot was looking for grass, and Abraham was looking for grace."

Moses goes on (verse 14):

**The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever." (13:14-15)**

Abraham let God choose and the patriarch got everything. His inheritance represents everything that is ours in Christ. The picture of Abraham walking the length and the breadth, all the dimensions of the land, is reminiscent of what Paul says about our inheritance in Christ, in Ephesians, "I want you to know the height and the depth and the width of the love of Christ." That is our inheritance.

So what if evil people have everything in this world. So what if they take our goods away from us. The nearness of God is our good, and we have him forever, to enjoy him throughout eternity.

F.B. Meyer writes:

God honors those that honor Him. He withholds no good thing from them that walk uprightly. He meets him that rejoices and works righteousness. If only we will go on doing what is right, giving up the best to others to avoid dispute, considering God's interest first and our own last; expending ourselves for the coming and glory of the kingdom of heaven; we shall find that God shall charge himself with our interest. And he will do infinitely more for us that we could.

Lot had to ask the men of Sodom if he might sojourn among them; he had no hold on the land. But it was all given, unasked, to Abraham, including the verdant circle upon which Lot had set his heart.

That is the majesty of meekness: bearing patiently the spiteful attacks of malice and envy; overcoming evil with good; living in the midst of difficult people and loving them; keeping our mouths shut and our hearts open when we're in the presence of detractors, and remaining unruffled and composed through a storm of unkindness and misrepresentation.

*"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."*

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# A HUNGER FOR HEALING

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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Matthew 5:6

Fourth Message

Gary Vanderet

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I spent some time last week with a man who is searching. He is in mid-life, lives in the East Bay, and he is not yet a believer. About six months ago, he visited a church where I spoke on the twenty-third Psalm. In the course of my message, I said that our unfulfilling searches in life reveal our need for God. I quoted Augustine's words, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Him. We were made for God, and nothing else will do. He is the only end to our search."

This man has spent the first half of his life living like many of us: rushing through college, falling in love, marrying, embarking on a career and the subsequent upward climb, and acquiring possessions to make the journey comfortable. He had played a hard fought first half of life, but now it is half-time and he is in the midst of serious reflection. He doesn't want to play the second half the same way as he did the first. For him, keeping score no longer offers the thrill it once did. He has taken some hits in his job, and he is in a little pain.

I believe that God is stimulating in this man a profound hunger that is nothing less than the answering cry of his heart to God's wooing.

That hunger for healing is the focus of the fourth beatitude of Jesus, to which we come this morning. In this verse, Jesus sets forth both the menu and the appetite that bring spiritual health. By means of a splendidly paradoxical sentence, Jesus lays out what we ought to eat and how we must eat if we are to have spiritual health and ultimate satisfaction. According to Jesus, spiritual health springs from a heart attitude of spiritual hunger. If "poor in spirit" describes our attitude toward ourselves; "mourning" our attitude toward sin; and "meek" our attitude toward others, then hungering and thirsting portray what must be our constant attitude toward God.

Our Lord's words in this beatitude are remarkably intense in that they speak of the strongest of human impulses. But it is hard for us to feel their intensity. After all, if we are thirsty, all we have to do is turn on the tap for cold, refreshing water; if we are hungry, we merely have to go to the refrigerator or drive to the nearest Golden Arches. However, to the average Palestinian, this expression would have spoken loud and clear, because he was never far from the possibility of starvation or dehydration.

This is not a pleasant picture. Jesus is not recom-

mending a polite desire for spiritual nourishment, but a starvation for righteousness. David knew that feeling, as his words in Psalm 63 illustrate: "O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water."

This language is too strong for many of us. It rules out the sleek, self satisfied, half-hearted religion that we know too well. The reason we don't feel a hunger and thirst for God is because we have quenched our dryness by other means, and we have developed strategies to protect us from the pain of unfulfilled longings and deep disappointments. We try and pretend that the pain of life isn't too bad after all.

But all of us are hungry and thirsty. We long for what God has designed for us to enjoy: tension-free relationships filled with deep, loving acceptance, and opportunities to make a difference in someone else's life. We all feel that thirst. It was put there by God! It is part of the dignity of our humanity being made in the image of God. We long for a quality of relationship and meaning that no other creature has the capacity to enjoy.

But we are also unbelievably foolish, in that we move in wrong directions in response to our thirst. The Israelites would not trust God to assuage their thirst. The prophet Jeremiah described their problem, and ours, too, when God looked deeply into the hearts of his people during a time when they were slipping far away from him. God is speaking: "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water" (2:13).

They had rejected the fresh running supply of God and his grace, the inexhaustible reserves of his life and power, choosing instead the stagnant waters of cracked cisterns which they themselves had built. We are no different. We are determined to satisfy the longings of our hearts by taking a shovel, looking for a likely spot, and digging for whatever fulfillment we can find. We want to run our own lives.

The Scriptures consistently expose man as being both thirsty and foolish. We long for the satisfaction we were created to enjoy, but we move away from God to find it. If we could look inside our hearts this morning, many of us would uncover those two elements: hunger and thirst, deep longings for what we don't have, and stub-

born independence that is reflected in our wrong strategies for finding the life we desire. The longings reveal our *dignity*; the foolish strategies, our *depravity*.

**“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled” (Matt 5:6, NIV).**

Every one of us should ask ourselves from time to time, What am I hungering for? Is it power, money, a better house, nicer clothes, a bigger car, a better husband or wife, acceptance and love from someone who doesn’t accept me?

If our hungers are misdirected, then we will never be satisfied. Looking for love from another person is a bottomless pit. No one can fill that void. There is nothing that can satisfy us if we hunger for the wrong things; we will just want more of the same. But Jesus says that if we hunger and thirst after righteousness, then we will be filled.

That is what he told his disciples too, in John 6:

**“Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man shall give to you, for on Him the Father, even God, has set His seal.” (John 6:27, NASB)**

There are only two kinds of bread: that which lasts and that which doesn’t. According to Jesus, it is far better to work for the bread that endures. The problem with most of us, however, is that we are working for the kind of bread which doesn’t last—crusts which temporarily fills us but eventually leave us unsatisfied again. Jesus reveals that the problem is not that we work for bread (because we all have to earn a living in order to eat), it is that bread doesn’t last very long. It does not satisfy in the end, so it is a bad investment.

Jesus’ words reveal a major flaw in our lifestyles: We spend all of our energies working for bread, only to find that it doesn’t satisfy. When we’re young, all we can think about is getting a hot car, developing a strong, healthy body, or some other trivial pursuit. As we get older, we dedicate our energies to striving for economic independence, owning the perfect house or some other possession that will make life more satisfying.

Many people feel that the most important thing in life is to be healthy and economically sufficient. That is why they go to work every day. As the Presidential election approaches, candidates are being evaluated, not on their integrity or character, or what they propose to do about improving the moral conditions of our nation, but on what they will do about the economy. That is the bottom line: what is going to happen to our living conditions?

The philosophy of many (including some Christians) is described in the little jingle:

Into this world to eat and to sleep,  
And to know no reason why he was born,

Save to consume the corn,  
Devour the cattle, flock and fish,  
And leave behind an empty dish.

Jesus challenges that way of thinking. His words force us to ask ourselves, What are we working for? Is everything we do merely preparation for the weekend? The thing that makes us different from animals is that having a full belly and a comfortable place to sleep does not satisfy us. It is an unwise investment to put all our energy into that which will not pay off.

Years ago, I used to watch the Jack Benny show, and I remember a dialogue between Jack and his servant Rochester. Jack had a vault in which he kept all his money, and now and then he would open it (you couldn’t see it, but you could hear all the locks and chains being opened). Rochester would yell out, “But Mr. Benny, you can’t take it with you!” Jack would yell back, “Then I’m not going!” He was wrong, of course. We are all going—and the hearse will not be towing any U-Haul trailers. We leave it all behind for someone else.

Jesus says we are to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these other things will be added.

Now I have no problem knowing what “righteousness” is; no one has to tell me what it means to be a righteous man. My problem is *becoming* a righteous man. I need help to do that. The righteousness that we are to seek is that beauty of character and conduct which pleases God. And what Jesus promises here is that if we pursue that, that is all he asks. If we hunger and thirst after righteousness, God will satisfy that desire. God sees more than our performance: He sees the intent of our hearts. That is why he loved David. If we were to judge David by his performance, we would say he was a failure. But God saw that David sought him and longed to be a godly man.

Even a casual glance at the New Testament reveals that Jesus had a difficult time with the Pharisees, the clergy of his day. He called them hypocrites, because they were outwardly correct but inwardly corrupt. They preached decency, but their hearts were defiled. Their rules could not correct the state of their own hearts, nor could they correct others. Jesus goes on after the beatitudes to contrast Christian righteousness with Pharisaic righteousness. The latter was an external conformity to rules; the former is an inner righteousness of heart, mind and motive. This is what we should hunger and thirst for.

There are a lot Pharisees around still. They work hard, they seem upright, but they are very uptight. Goodness for them is a demanding business. They’re chaste, honest, sober, respectable, Bible-toting, church-going people, but everything seems out of step. As one man put it, “their faith exists as a dull habit.” They have an appearance of righteousness, with its self-imposed



worship and discipline, but they lack the love that springs from contact with God.

Credos and rites and rituals cannot modify our behavior. Neither will admonishments to read our Bible more, pray more or go to church more often. The problem with rules and regulations is that they have no mechanism for overriding our natural tendencies to go wrong. All they can do is reveal them and say to us: "You should!" "You shouldn't!" "You can't!"—and the rest is up to us. But that's the problem.

Goodness is a job for God! We must stop horning in on his business and ask him to bring about change in us. "To those who are far from righteousness," God says, "I will bring my righteousness near" (Isa 46:12).

Righteousness requires effort and discipline, but it cannot be reduced to a rigorous technique. It involves making the effort to stay close to Christ and listening to his voice. As we draw close to him, walking with him, talking to him, listening to his words, relying on him, and asking for his help, his character begins to rub off on us. It's not what we are, but what we want to be that matters.

In order to accomplish this, we need our appetites stimulated. As David discovered, we will not really feel the hunger and thirst that Jesus is referring to until we experience a wilderness. Richard Foster says: "God becomes a reality when he becomes a necessity." I know from my own experiences and those of many who have shared their suffering with me, that oftentimes it is pain that detaches us from the idolatries that rob us of joy. Pain is God's way of prying our fingers away from the things that are false and will not satisfy. Pain pulls us away from lesser loves and enlarges our intimacy with our Heavenly Father, bringing us peace and unimaginable joy.

When David was anointed by Samuel, the prophet whispered into his ear, "You shall be the next king." Very soon afterwards, David defeated Goliath in a magnificent display of faith. But where do we find David following his victory? In the wilderness! Hunted by a mad king, he could not fight back. Even when it was in his power to get revenge, he could not, because he knew that he had to trust God as he prepared for kingship.

In that wilderness, David poured out his heart to God. More than fifty of the psalms record his lamenting. In his tears and anguish, he learned to trust in God. In the wilderness, he learned that his own resources were not enough. In the wilderness, he learned to say, "He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters." David discovered that God could transform a wilderness into a green pasture.

It is in a wilderness that we discover the supernatural provision of God.

The nation of Israel would learn this. After they were brought out of the Egyptian captivity, and victoriously come through the Red Sea, their enemies destroyed, where do we find them? In the Promised Land? No! In a wilderness. Why did they not immediately enter the land? Here is what Moses told them, in Deuteronomy 8:2-3:

**"And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna [supernatural food] which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord."**

This was also true of our Lord. What happened after his baptism and assurance that he was God's beloved Son? Where do we find him? Sitting on a throne, ruling his kingdom? No! The Spirit immediately led him into a wilderness. As Jesus was preparing to be king over his people, he was led to a desert where he had to trust his Father while he hungered and thirsted for forty days. After that time, angels ministered to him and provided him with supernatural food.

There is a hunger in the human heart which nothing but God can satisfy, and a thirst that no one but he can quench.

Our discomfort is God's doing. He hounds us. He hems us in. He thwarts our dreams. He foils our best laid plans. He frustrates our hopes. He waits until we know that nothing will ease our pain, nothing will make life worth living except his presence.

This is what makes us thirsty for God.

David Roper describes these times in his book *Seeing Through*:

*Times in the wilderness.* Dark days. Days of weakness and shame. Being disregarded, misunderstood, criticized, and accused. Living with hurtful gestures and critical words. The death of our dreams, for ourselves, our marriages, our children. Waiting in lonely isolation, with hope deferred, without promised togetherness or companionship, and with no end of waiting in sight.

*Seasons of obscurity.* Dreary duty that no one sees or applauds. Being unknown, uncelebrated, unnoticed and unimportant. This is what delivers us from the need of "man's empty praise" so we can be satisfied with God's "well done" alone.

*Times of great temptation.* Satan tries to sift us like wheat. They humble us and purify us, and teach us

pray.

*Times of disappointment and debilitating discouragement.* Regret, struggle, failure. The agony of spent vice and self-indulgence. Times of failure where we learn that our wills are incapable of keeping us from sin.

*Times of learning to do without.* Without love, beauty, money, marriage, or health. Being stripped of friends, father, mother, brother, reputation.

Slowly, steadily, God strips us of all our longings, leaving us with nothing but a desire for him alone. It is then that we can say, with the psalmist, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And being with you I desire nothing on earth" (Ps 73:25).

Samuel Rutherford explained it in this way in an essay in the seventeenth century:

If God had told me some time ago that he was about to make me as happy as I could be in this world, and then had told me that he should begin by crippling me in arm or limb, and removing me from all my usual sources of enjoyment, I should have thought it a very strange mode of accomplishing his purpose. And yet, how is his wisdom manifest even in this! For if you should see a man shut up in a closed room, idolizing a set of lamps and rejoicing in their light, and you wished to make him truly happy, you would begin by blowing out all his lamps and then throw open the shutters to let in the light of heaven.

Jesus said:

**"Do not work for the food that spoils, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you...I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty"** (John 6:27, 35).

Malcolm Muggeridge expresses this thought in his confession:

I may, I suppose, regard myself as being a relatively successful man. People occasionally look at me on the street. That's fame. I can fairly easily earn enough to qualify for the highest slopes of inland revenue. That's success. Furnished with money and a little fame, even the elderly, if they care to, can partake of trendy diversions. That's pleasure. It might happen once in a while that something I said or wrote was sufficiently heeded to persuade myself that it represented a serious impact on our time. That's fulfillment. Yet I say to you, and I beg of you to believe me, multiply those tiny triumphs by a million, add them all together, and they are nothing, less than nothing, a positive impediment, measured against one drink of that living water that is offered to the spiritually hungry.

*"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled."*

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# THE MIRACLE OF MERCY

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Catalog No. 1083

Matthew 5:7

Fifth Message

Gary Vanderet

September 15, 1996

As we come to the fifth beatitude of Jesus this morning, we are going to focus our thoughts on the subject of mercy.

Mercy is the great friend of the helpless and the weak. When I think of mercy, I remember one of my favorite Charley Brown cartoons. Lucy is walking down the street, saying to herself:

"That Chuck. He's something else...

I don't even know why I think about him...

Chuck doesn't seem to understand a girl's emotions...

In fact, Chuck doesn't seem to understand girls at all...

Chuck is hard to talk to because he doesn't understand life...

He doesn't understand laughing and crying...

He doesn't understand love, and silly talk, and touching hands, and things like that...

He plays a lot of baseball, but I doubt it if he even understands baseball..."

Then she knocks on Charley Brown's door, and says,

"I don't think you understand **ANYTHING**, Chuck!"

As she is walking away, Charlie Brown replies:

"I don't even understand what it is I don't understand!"

**"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy"** (Matt 5:7, NASB).

Mercy is compassion for people in need. Richard Lenski distinguishes mercy from grace, in this helpful word: "the noun *eleos* (mercy)...always deals with what we see of pain, misery, and distress, these results of sin; and *charis* (grace) always deals with the sin and guilt itself. The one extends relief, the other pardon; the one cures, heals, and helps, the other cleanses and reinstates."

To go back to the Charley Brown story, Charley is helpless: he needs mercy; Lucy needs grace.

The fifth beatitude marks somewhat of a turning point in our Lord's discourse. In a sense, the first four beatitudes speak to believers in terms of their need and their consciousness of their need. Beginning with the fifth beatitude, we now look at the Christian's disposition, the fruit that flows out of a clear view of ourselves and our need.

We have already seen that everything begins with a proper view of ourselves. In the first beatitude, we see

that we must acknowledge our complete and utter bankruptcy before God. Next, we are to mourn over the cause of that: our sin, our fallen nature, and all the sins that flow out of that. Third, we are to be meek, humble and gentle toward others, allowing our spiritual poverty (which we have admitted to and grieved over) to condition our behavior toward others as well as God. Fourth, it is the "meek" who are also the "merciful." To be meek is to acknowledge to others that *we* are sinners; to be merciful is to have compassion on others, for *they* are sinners, too.

The quality of mercy, therefore, arises out of our own failure and sin. Unjudged sin has the effect of hardening us and separating us from others, but sin acknowledged and repented of sensitizes us to their frailty and draws us closer to them. Common sin is our common ground; publicans and sinners become our kind of people.

Jesus, of course, was the very essence of mercy. Throughout his three short years of ministry, he reached out to the sick, the blind, and the deaf, and healed them. He found prostitutes and tax collectors and drew them into his circle of love. He cared for the lonely, the destitute, and the fatherless. Never was there a person on the face of this earth with the mercy of Jesus. On one occasion, he came upon a funeral procession and saw a mother weeping over the death of her son. She was already a widow, and now she had no child to care for. Jesus cared for her. He stopped the funeral procession, put his hand on the casket, and raised the child from the dead.

Mercy is compassion in action for people in need. Jesus did not specify the categories of need. It may be someone overcome by disaster, like the traveler from Jerusalem to Jericho to whom the "good Samaritan" showed "mercy." It may be the hungry, the sick, the outcast, or the lonely. It may even be those who wrong us. Justice cries out for punishment, but mercy for forgiveness. Our God is a merciful God. He shows mercy continuously. His children, the citizens of his kingdom, will do likewise.

I have been learning much from Henry Nouwen concerning mercy. Dr. Nouwen is a priest who used to teach at Harvard University. At the height of his career, he left Harvard and moved to a community called Daybreak, near Toronto, in order to take on the demanding chores required by his friendship with a man named Adam. Henry Nouwen now ministers not to intellectu-

als, but to a young man who is considered by many to be a useless person, someone who perhaps should have been aborted. Nouwen describes his friend:

Adam is a 25-year-old man who cannot speak, cannot dress or undress himself, cannot walk alone, cannot eat without much help. He does not cry or laugh. Only occasionally does he make eye contact. His back is distorted. His arm and leg movements are twisted. He suffers from severe epilepsy and despite heavy medication, sees few days without grand-mal seizures. Sometimes, as he grows suddenly rigid, he utters a howling groan. On a few occasions, I've seen one big tear roll down his cheek.

It takes me about an hour and a half to wake Adam up, give him his medication, carry him into his bath, wash him, shave him, clean his teeth, dress him, walk him to the kitchen, give him his breakfast, put him in his wheelchair and bring him to the place where he spends most of his day with therapeutic exercises.

Many who visit Nouwen and watch him perform his duties wonder whether he is putting his time to the best use. If you have heard him speak or read his books, you know he has much to offer the world. Couldn't someone else take over the menial tasks involved in caring for Adam? Yet, if you broach that subject with Nouwen, as many have done, he will inform you that to think that way is to misunderstand completely what is going on. "I am not giving up anything," he insists. "It is *I*, not Adam, who gets the main benefits from our friendship."

One writer who spent time with Nouwen lists the benefits that Nouwen has gained through his work of mercy:

The hours spent with Adam have given him an inner peace so fulfilling that it makes most of his other, more high-minded tasks seem boring and superficial by contrast. Early on, as he sat beside that helpless child-man, he realized how marked with rivalry and competition, how obsessive, was his drive for success in academia and Christian ministry. Adam taught him that "what makes us human is not our mind, but our heart, not our ability to think but our ability to love." From Adam's simple nature, he had glimpsed the "emptiness" necessary before one can be filled by God.

The interviewer left, convicted of his own spiritual poverty. He wrote: "I who so carefully arrange my own writer's life to make it efficient and single focused. The merciful are indeed blessed, I learned, for they will be shown mercy."

So the fundamental idea of being merciful is to give help to the wretched, to relieve the miserable. Mercy is compassion in action. We must be careful to not think that we are being merciful simply because we *feel* compassionate toward someone in distress. The story is told of an Englishman who happened across a friend whose horse had just been accidentally killed. While a crowd

of onlookers expressed words of sympathy, this man stepped forward and said loudly to the others, "I am sorry five pounds. How much are you sorry?" One of the great ploys of the evil one is to get us to feel, but not to act. If we *feel* long enough, soon we will stop feeling.

Mercy, therefore, is demonstrated in acts of love and compassion. Mercy will notice and get involved in the needs of others. It cannot stay uninvolved in the face of genuine need. It has to respond; it is compelled by something deep inside. There are needs all around us, including undiscerned needs in this body. It is possible that you can meet some of them.

The beauty of the early church was their genuine concern for the needs of their brothers and sisters. No possession was held back if by its disposal some need might be met. Describing the first century Christians to the Emperor Hadrian, Aristodes wrote:

They love one another. They never fail to help widows; they save orphans from those who would hurt them. If they have something, they give freely to the man who has nothing; if they see a stranger, they take him home, and are happy as though he were a real brother. They don't consider themselves brothers in the usual sense, but brothers instead through the Spirit, in God.

Mercy is not only compassion in action; the act of being merciful describes someone who forgives and pardons another who is in the wrong. The merciful person forgives. He remembers his own sin and God's mercy to him, and he understands the weaknesses of others.

We need to be clear about what Jesus is saying. He is not suggesting that mercy has any purchasing power which somehow obligates God to show us mercy. The mercy that we demonstrate is merely evidential; it shows that we understand the basis of our own acceptance before God. If we fully understand the depth of our own need for mercy, we will extend mercy to others. If we are not merciful, we are indicating that we do not realize how much we ourselves have been forgiven.

That is what is behind our Lord's comment in response to Peter's question, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Peter's natural inclination (and ours, too) is to establish a finite limit to the number of offenses a man can endure. Seven times, and then we've had it! Jesus says, in effect, that forgiveness and mercy have no limits. There is never a time when we can legitimately say, "I've had enough," or "That's the last straw." God himself never treats us that way; he has forgiven us *all* our transgressions. The hymn states it well:

*His love knows no limits,  
His grace has no measure,  
His power has no boundary known unto men.  
For out of his infinite riches in glory,  
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again.*

These are hard words, but they are mercifully hard words. It is possible to attend church, lead an outward-

ly moral life, know all the answers, and yet hold a death grip on grudges, such as unwillingness to forgive a relative or business associate. No matter what someone does to reconcile, you continue to nourish hatred, cherish your animosities, and revel in malice.

Our Lord is really saying that we are truly forgiven only when we are truly repentant. To be truly repentant means we realize that we deserve nothing but punishment, and that if we are forgiven, that is to be attributed entirely to the love of God, to his mercy and grace, and to nothing else at all. But it goes further. It means this: If I am truly repentant, if I am aware of my position before God, and realize that I am only forgiven in this way, then of necessity I must forgive those who trespass against me.

Now it may be the case that bitterness and hatred recur even after you have forgiven someone. The fact that you have forgiven, and continue to forgive, is a sign of grace, despite the ambivalence and imperfections of your forgiveness. Perhaps you find forgiveness difficult because the offense is recent; you are still in emotional shock and cannot respond properly. The warning of Jesus is not addressed to such. It is for those who *will not* forgive. The point is this: If we are Christians, we can forgive, and we will forgive, however imperfect our forgiveness may be.

I recall Corrie Ten Boom's confession in her book *The Hiding Place*. In one passage, she describes a postwar meeting with a guard from Ravensbruck concentration camp, that dark and evil place where her sister had died and she herself had been subjected to horrible indignities. She writes:

It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower room in the processing center at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there—the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie's pain-blanching face. He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing, "How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein," he said. "To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!" His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people in Bloemendaal the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side. Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them, Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him. I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness. As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and

through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.

Ultimately, compassion is a gift from God. People offer seminars for the purpose of making us sensitive to others, but true compassion can never be the product of systematic study or self-effort; it is the fruit of intimacy with the God who cares for us (1 Pet 5:7). His caring begets caring for others. His compassion rubs off on us. His love becomes ours, and our love grows mightily in his love.

This word "mercy" is perhaps the most important word in all of the Old Testament. It is the Hebrew word *hesed*, a term we have heard much about in our studies in the life of David. The King James Version of the Old Testament translates this word twelve different ways. It is so rich that we cannot find an English equivalent. But its definition, I believe, is the essence of this beatitude. Bruce Waltke, a noted Old Testament authority, says this about *hesed*:

It has three ideas. First of all, it means that two people have a relationship; they are bound together. Secondly, it means that one party in that relationship is in a desperate situation where he cannot save himself, but the other party can; and the idea is that the stronger party, out of mercy, out of loyalty, out of love, out of compassion, saves that person.

That is the quality that we need in our lives.

We will end our service this morning by partaking of the Lord's Supper. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is the supreme example of mercy in action. The perfect act of mercy and being merciful is God's sending his only Son to die for us. He saw our pitiable estate, and he was moved to action. He came and dealt with our condition.

Jesus was the One who never sinned. He never did any harm to anyone. He preached the truth, seeking to save those who were lost. As he was being nailed to the cross, what did he say as he looked upon the people who were responsible? "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." It is not they who were doing it; it was Satan. They were the victims; they were being governed and dominated by sin.

Mercy is the quality that we need to demonstrate in our homes. Mercy looks beyond the actions of others to the need that is represented by those actions. Jesus said, "He who is forgiven much, loves much." Ask God to break your heart this morning with the sin that breaks his heart. Ask him to let you see yourself the way he sees you. Out of that brokenness, and because of his cleansing and forgiveness, you will look upon others with new eyes.

**"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."**

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# A PURIFYING PROMISE

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Catalog No. 1084

Matthew 5:8

Sixth Message

Gary Vanderet

September 22, 1996

Perspective is critical in life. Consider this letter, written by a college student to her parents:

Dear Mom and Dad,

I just thought I'd drop you a note to clue you in on my plans. I've fallen in love with a guy named Jim. He quit high school after the eleventh grade to get married. About a year ago, he got a divorce. We've been going steady for two months and plan to get married in the fall. Until then, I've decided to move into his apartment (I think I might be pregnant). At any rate, I dropped out of school last week, although I'd like to finish college sometime in the future.

On the next page, she continued:

Mom and Dad, I just want you to know that everything I've written so far in this letter is false. NONE of it is true. But Mom and Dad, it *is* true that I got a C in French and flunked Math. It is true that I'm going to need more money for my tuition payments.

This young woman understood the importance of perspective. Even critical matters, if they are viewed from a certain vantage point, may seem unimportant. As C. S. Lewis said, "Seeing depends on where you stand."

Sight is one of the greatest gifts granted to man. Our friend Gus Marwiah is a good reminder of this. Gus was losing his sight to glaucoma, but recent surgery has restored his vision and he is rejoicing over that. But there is a "seeing" that surpasses even this faculty. Someone once bluntly said to Helen Keller, "Isn't it terrible to be blind?" She responded, "Better to be blind and see with your heart, than to have two good eyes, and see nothing."

There is a reality all around us that does not register on our retinas. But in a materialistic world like ours, the only things that seem to matter are those that can be detected with the five senses. As the comedian Flip Wilson used to say, "What you see is what you get." There is, however, another realm of reality, one that is more actual, factual, and more substantial than anything we can see, touch, hear, taste, or smell. That realm is the focus of our thoughts this morning as we examine the sixth beatitude of Jesus, from the gospel of Matthew,

**"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."** (Matt 5:8, NASB)

I must admit that I approached my study in this beatitude with some trepidation. It didn't help when I read

Martyn Lloyd-Jones' paraphrase: "Blessed are those who are pure, not only on the surface, but at the center of their being and at the source of every activity." As I pondered the depth of this heart requirement, it troubled me even more, because I had to admit that my heart is the source of my problems. Jeremiah's words kept coming back to me, "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick."

Jesus said, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander." He later told his disciples: "Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean...For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, and adultery."

All we need to do is look into our hearts to see the darkness and the mixed motives that so often accompany even our best efforts. Ivan Turgenev, the 19th century Russian novelist, said: "I do not know what the heart of a bad man is like. But I do know what the heart of a good man is like. And it is terrible."

But we also know from the gospels that Jesus was the sinner's friend. Our Lord sided with losers. Those who were closest to him certainly did not have the cleanest track records. So there must be more to a pure heart than moral purity.

What does it mean, then, to be "pure in heart?" The purity that Jesus is referring to is being clean in the sense of not being mixed with anything else. William Barclay wrote that the Greek word for "pure" was used at times of clear water; of metals without alloy; of grain that had been winnowed (freed from the mixture of other particles), and of unmixed feelings.

In the context of the other beatitudes, purity of heart seems to refer in some sense to our relationships. One scholar defines the pure in heart as the "single-minded, who are free from the divided self." In this case, the pure heart is the single heart. It prepares the way for the single eye, which Jesus makes reference to in the next chapter.

More precisely, the primary reference here is to sincerity. As Psalm 24 declares, the person with "clean hands and a pure heart" is one "who does not lift his soul to what is false (an idol) and does not swear deceitfully." In their relationship with God and man, the pure in heart are free from falsehood; so they are "the utterly

sincere" (JBP). Their whole lives, both public and private, are transparent before God and men. Their very hearts, including their thoughts and motives, are pure, unmixed with anything devious, ulterior, or base. Hypocrisy and deceit are abhorrent to them; they are without guile. The thought is represented in the words "singleness" and "sincerity." It holds the idea of being without guile, being sincere and honest in motive.

The word *sincere* is actually a Latin word, meaning "without wax." The term means "sun tested." The ancients fired their fine porcelain in kilns, and sometimes in the process of firing, cracks appeared in the finished product. Dishonest merchants smeared wax over these cracks and tried to pass them off as flawless porcelain. That worked—unless the pieces were held up to the light of the sun. Honest merchants would declare their wares to be *sine cera*—"without wax."

How few of us live one life and live it out in the open! We are tempted to wear a different mask and play a different role according to what the occasion demands. This is not reality, but play-acting, which is the essence of hypocrisy. Some people weave around themselves such a tissue of lies that they can no longer tell which part of them is real and which is make-believe. Alone among men, Jesus Christ was absolutely pure in heart. He was utterly guileless.

There is story told about some American soldiers during the Korean War who rented a house and hired a local boy to do their housekeeping and cooking. It was common for soldiers to get that kind of set-up for easy-come, easy-go, easy-pay.

The little Korean fellow they hired had an unbelievably positive attitude. He was always smiling. So the soldiers played one trick after another on him. They nailed his shoes to the floor. He'd get up, pull out the nails with pliers, slip on the shoes, and maintain his excellent spirit. They put grease on the stove handles, and he would wipe each one off, smiling and singing his way through the day. They balanced buckets of water over the door, and he'd get drenched. But he would dry off and never fuss, time after time.

Finally, they became so ashamed of themselves they called him in one day and said, "We want you to know that we're never going to trick you again. Thank you for having such an outstanding attitude." He asked, "You means, no more nail shoes to floor?" "No more." "You means, no more sticky on stove knobs?" "No more." "You means, no more water buckets on door?" "No more." "Okay then, no more spit in soup!" he responded with a smile.

It is easy to do that, isn't it? On the outside we appear one way, but on the inside, we are spitting in the soup.

That is why Jesus had such a hard time with the Pharisees. He was forever trying to get these men who were so obsessed with external, ceremonial purity to look inside themselves. He told them on one occasion: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you

hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisees! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness."

"Hypocrisy" is the word which Jesus used to characterize this display. In classical Greek, the *hupocritos* was first an orator, then an actor. In the ancient Greek dramas, an actor would place a large, grinning mask in front of his face and quote his comedy lines. Then at an appropriate place he would take a frowning, sad mask and quote his tragic lines, and the audience would respond appropriately. So the actor was called a *hupocritos*—one who wears a mask. Figuratively, the word came to be applied to anybody who treats the world as a stage on which he plays a part. Such a one lays aside his true identity and assumes a false one. He is no longer himself, but he is in disguise, impersonating someone else. He wears a mask.

Now in the theater, of course, there is no harm or deceit involved in actors playing their parts; it is an accepted convention. The audience know they are watching a drama; they are not taken in by it. The trouble with the religious hypocrite, however, is that he deliberately sets out to deceive people. He is like an actor in that he is pretending (so that what the audience sees is not the real person but a part, a mask, a disguise), yet he is quite unlike the actor in this respect: he takes some legitimate religious practice and turns it into what it was never meant to be, namely a piece of make-believe, a theatrical display before an audience.

A hypocrite is a one who is outwardly correct but inwardly corrupt. The Pharisees taught decency, but their hearts were defiled. Their rules could not correct the state of their own hearts, nor could they correct others.

Charles Spurgeon said: "It is not our littleness that hinders Christ; but our bigness. It is not our weakness that hinders Christ; it is our strength. It is not our darkness that hinders Christ; it is our supposed light that holds back His hand."

This is clearly evident in John 9, in the incident in which Jesus healed a man who was blind from birth. The Pharisees became upset by this, because Jesus had broken one of their rules by healing on the Sabbath. Later on in the story, Jesus reveals the message which the miracle represented. He said: "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, "What? Are we blind too?" Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains." The distinction in the story

is not between those who were blind and those who could see, but between those who knew they were blind and those who claimed they could see.

It is significant that the man in that story was *born* blind, and he is a *beggar*. He is representative of all of us, because in a very real sense we are all blind from birth; and we are all beggars, unable to free ourselves from our predicament. We sin because we are sinful. "The one spiritual disease," G.K. Chesterton wrote, "is thinking that one is quite well." For this reason Jesus reserved his harshest words for people would not admit that there was something basically wrong with them, those who still believed that there was something good about them that God ought to accept. Amazingly, it was the clergy of Jesus' day who could not see their own need.

That is why Jesus began these beatitudes by saying: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*" Blessed are those who realize that they have nothing within themselves that commends them to God. So the first step to clear sight is a plea for help, an acknowledgment of moral destitution.

James writes in the third chapter of his letter that the wisdom from God is first "pure" (the same word). It is real, authentic, sincere. In our innermost being, we must be real, honest and transparent before God. James also says that such wisdom is "without hypocrisy." The man who is wise in this sense is genuine; he is the same on the inside as he professes to be on the outside. His whole life, public and private, is transparent before God and man. Sincerity is what makes our lives powerful and influential. Everything else springs from this quality.

Many years ago, when my wife and I were living in Long Beach, the newspaper ran a story about a man who went into a local fast food restaurant to buy chicken. Inadvertently, the store manager handed him the box in which he had placed the day's profits instead of the box of chicken. It seemed the manager used a chicken box to camouflage the nightly deposit. The fellow took the box, and he and his companion drove away. When they arrived at the park, they opened the box and discovered the money. That would be a vulnerable moment for anyone! But this man got into his car, returned to the restaurant, and gave the money to the manager. As you can imagine, the manager was ecstatic. This man probably had saved him his job. He exclaimed, "Stick around! I want to call the newspaper and have them take your picture. You are the most honest man I have ever met." But the man refused. When asked why, he replied, "Well, I'm married, and the woman I'm with is not my wife." On the surface, we can look honest and sincere (we would give back the dime in the phone booth!), but underneath is the real test. People are looking for a demonstration, not an explanation.

The Lord wants us to be free, to live our lives out in the open. He wants us to have nothing to hide, no repu-

tation to defend, and nothing to preserve about ourselves. Everywhere today, people are crying out that they need to "be themselves." But they go about it the wrong way. We are taught that the way to be "me" is to think about myself—"my" advantage, "my" efforts, "my" rights—and to defend and demand them. But Scripture says that there is another way: it is to not be afraid to look at the evil in your heart and in your life, because you have another basis on which you can receive the acceptance and approval of God. It is a gift to you! It comes by faith, by continually accepting anew the gift of righteousness, of already being pleasing to God, and on that basis serving him out of a heart of gratitude for what you already have.

One of the great privileges of being an elder is praying for individuals in this congregation. Recently, we prayed for someone who has been ill for some time. This woman shared with us a tragic tale of difficulties and pain. Just when we were about to pray for her, she felt compelled to go deeper, and she laid bare her life to us. At that moment, all of us were taken to the cross of Christ. We felt plunged in his blood; we felt his cleansing bath. God was in that room. Though we could not see him, we knew he was there. It was our privilege, as his emissaries, to say to this woman, "You are clean. You are forgiven."

That is the promise of Jesus to each one of us. If we come clean, if we are open and sincere, we will "see God."

Some time back, *Leadership* magazine carried an unsigned article by a pastor who confessed to years of bondage to pornography of the grossest kind. He related what finally released him and enabled him to confess his sins. It is confirmation of what we are saying. This man ran across a book by Francois Mauriac, a Catholic French novelist, entitled *What I Believe*. In the book, the author concluded that there was one powerful reason to seek purity, the one Christ gave in this beatitude: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." It is this promise that the pure will see God that empowers us to share our struggle in our battle against lust. This pastor wrote:

The thought hit me like a bell rung in a dark, silent hall. So far, none of the scary, negative arguments against lust had succeeded in keeping me from it . . . But here was a description of what I was missing by continuing to harbor lust: I was limiting my intimacy with God. The love he offers is so transcendent and possessing that it requires our faculties to be purified and cleansed before we can possibly contain it. Could he, in fact, substitute another thirst and another hunger for the one I had never filled? Would living water somehow quench lust? That was the gamble of faith.

In reality, it is no gamble, because we cannot lose when we turn to God. The way to fight lust is to feed faith with the precious and magnificent promise that the pure in heart will see, face to face, the all-satisfying

God of glory.

Let us therefore purify our hearts. Let us open up and confess to God the things that we have never before confessed, and then ask him whom he might want us to confess them to. If we will do this, if we will live one life, and live it out in the open, the unequivocal promise of Jesus is that we will see God. The thing that is holding us back from that is fearing that if we confess, we will never see God! But the truth of the matter is this: the thing that is hindering our intimacy with God is our inability to confess those things. May God grant us the courage, and the grace, to confess, so that all of us may experience the glorious promise of Jesus,

*"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."*

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# SEEDS OF PEACE

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Catalog No. 1085

Matthew 5:9

Seventh Message

Gary Vanderet

September 29, 1996

Will and Ariel Durant in their famous book *The Lessons of History*, begin the chapter on "History and War" with these words: "War is one of the constants of history, and has not diminished with civilization and democracy. In the last 3,421 years of recorded history, only 268 have seen no war." That is a chilling statement. Today, anyone old enough to understand what is being said on television knows that multiple wars are being fought at this very moment.

The charter of the United Nations establishes the purpose for that organization's existence as "the discovery and eradication of the root causes of warfare." There have been numerous conferences held and organizations formed having similar objectives, yet, as one man aptly put it, "We are no closer to a solution than we were the day Cain slew Abel."

On an individual level, a solution is no closer. Homes and families are disintegrating at an alarming rate, indicating that the same turmoil exists between husbands and wives, parents and children.

What is the answer to all of this? Some say that we must come to an understanding that war is unprofitable, and stop fighting. Remember the old bumper sticker, "What if they had a war and nobody came?" But Christians know that the answer to war will never be a matter of bootstrap ethics. Peace is impossible for the human race without a radical change in human nature.

That is the theme of the seventh beatitude of Jesus:

**"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."** (Matt 5:9, NASB)

Every Christian, according to Jesus, is to be a peacemaker—in his home, in his community, and in the church.

First, we should note what Jesus is not saying. He is not saying: "Blessed are those who avoid all conflicts and confrontations." Nor is he saying, "Blessed are those who are easygoing and relaxed." His words do not mean, "Blessed are the passive, those who compromise their convictions when surrounded by others who disagree."

No, this is this same Jesus who would say later: "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies will be the members of his

own household" (Matt 10:34-36). In other words, conflict, even among families, would be the inevitable result of his coming. We must love Jesus best and put him first, above even our nearest and dearest relatives. So passivity is not what Jesus is talking about.

The clear teaching of the Scriptures is that we should never seek conflict or be responsible for it. On the contrary, we are to seek peace. Here is what Peter says:

**Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. For, "Whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech. He must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it."** (1 Pet 3:8-11, NIV)

The apostle Paul said:

**Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.** (Rom 12:17-19, NIV)

And the words of James:

**Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.** (Jas 3:13-18, NASB)

In the New Testament, the word "peace" comes from the Hebrew word *shalom*, which bears the idea of wholeness and overall well being. When a Jew greeted someone with *shalom*, he was wishing not just the absence of trouble, but for all that made for a complete, whole life. God's peace is not narrowly defined. It is much more than the absence of strife: it encompasses all of the person. It is positive. So a peacemaker is not one who is passive, but one who actively pursues peace in its fullness.



Peacemaking is a divine work, for peace means reconciliation—and God is the author of peace and reconciliation. Indeed, the same verb which is used in this beatitude of Christians is applied by Paul to what God has done through Christ. Through Christ, says the apostle, the Father was pleased “to reconcile to himself all things...*making peace* by the blood of his cross.” And Christ’s purpose was to create one new man in place of the two, Jew and Gentile, “*so making peace*.”

It is hardly surprising therefore that, according to this beatitude, the particular blessing which attaches to peacemakers is that “they shall be called sons of God.” Such people are seeking to do what their Father has done, which is loving people with his love, as Jesus will go on to explain in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. It is the devil who is the troublemaker. God loves reconciliation. Through his children, as formerly through his only begotten Son, he is bent on making peace.

Apparently that quality above all others is what designates Christians as true sons of God—because that is what God does: He makes peace. He reconciles people. Some go through life leaving turmoil in their wake. Everywhere they go they cause distress and upset because they are demanding, they want everything to center on themselves. But the characteristic of a son of God is that he serves, reconciles and makes peace wherever he goes. He doesn’t make situations difficult. To the extent that he can, he tries to bring about peace and reconciliation.

My wife startled me once when she said to me, “You love conflict! You thrive on it!” As I pondered this, it became clear to me that she was right. I am a survivor. I grew up in a chaotic home and I have learned to survive by fighting. When someone gets in my way, I take care of myself. But this kind of behavior is the antithesis of what Jesus is talking about in this beatitude.

Jesus is the model of how a peacemaker goes about his work. Paul writes in Phil. 2:

**Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross! (Phil 2:3-8, NIV)**

Here the apostle puts his finger on the one issue which divides and disintegrates the body. The thing that destroys harmony is a self seeking spirit—the desire to insist upon our own rights, to have our own way. Self assertiveness is the very essence of worldliness. Pride is the virus that causes the most damage to the health of our families and the body of Christ. If there is

continual conflict in our homes, if there is wrangling with business associates, somewhere at the root of it is pride.

C.S. Lewis points out that pride is the essential vice, the utmost evil. He writes: “Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that are mere fleabites by comparison: it was through pride that the devil became the devil. Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of man.” And because pride is at the center of our resistance to God, God himself resists it. James says: “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” When we chose to be great, we forfeit God’s grace.

On the other hand, humility releases God’s greatness. If pride leads to every other vice, humility leads to every other virtue. Humility is the basis of our life with God and our usefulness in the world. Here is how Thomas à Kempis put this: “The more humble a man is in himself, and the more submissive to God, so much more prudent shall he be in all his affairs, and enjoy greater peace and quiet of heart.”

That is why the order of these beatitudes is so important. Everything begins with brokenness. We can never be peacemakers without first being broken. Peacemakers are humble men and women who understand their spiritual poverty. Not only do they understand it, they feel it, and they mourn because of it. Poverty of spirit is what makes them gentle with others, especially those who hurt them. The meek do not take offense; the peaceful do not give offense unnecessarily. So the first step, and perhaps the one we need to remind ourselves of, is to realize how proud we are.

Pride shows itself in subtle ways. See if you can relate to some of these examples: insisting on recognition (our titles); wanting to be noticed, to be prominent and eminent; smarting when we’re not consulted or advised on a matter; dominating social situations; always telling our tales rather listening to others; resisting authority; getting angry and defensive when challenged; harboring a grudge; nursing a grievance; wallowing in self-pity; choosing our own kind rather than loving the lowly; wanting to be in the center rather than serving on the edge.

Proverbs says: “Through pride comes nothing but strife.” The source of our conflicts is our self assertive spirit which seeks to meet our own desires without regard for God or for others. Only by foregoing our rights and in humility regarding others as more important than ourselves will we become peacemakers and learn to live in harmony.

We need to deal with our stubborn tendency to get our own way and to do our own thing. You may say, “Don’t I have any rights? Things like the right to privacy, the right to acceptance, the right to recognition?” The answer is, yes! But if insisting on those rights in a particular situation could cause distress and create disharmony, then we must be willing to forego them in the interest of others.

That is the wisdom of God that James writes about. He actually describes two types of wisdom, the wisdom that is from above and the wisdom that is from below. Thus, there are two ways to influence others—through the humility that seeks to serve, and the arrogance that seeks to gain. Those are the two motivating energies, the two mindsets in the world. One is the seed of the woman; the other, the seed of the serpent. The former takes all one's energies, talents and gifts and uses them to benefit self; the latter takes all of these things and uses them for the benefit of others.

In this regard, one man I greatly respect and admire is Dr. Bruce Waltke. Chuck Swindoll shares the following incident which occurred when he accompanied Dr. Waltke on a visit to the mother church of the First Church of Christ Scientist, in downtown Boston. Dr. Swindoll writes:

When we got to the multiple-manual pipe organ, she [the hostess] began to talk about their doctrine and especially their belief about no judgment in the life beyond. Dr. Waltke waited for just the right moment and very casually asked:

"But, Ma'am, doesn't it say somewhere in the Bible, 'It is appointed unto man once to die and after that, the judgment'?"

He could have quoted Hebrews 9:27 in Greek! But he was so gracious, so tactful with the little lady. I must confess, I stood back, thinking, "Go for it, Bruce. Now we've got her where we want her!"

The lady, without a pause, said simply, "Would you like to see the second floor?"

You know what Dr. Waltke said? "We surely would, thank you."

She smiled, somewhat relieved, and started to lead us up a flight of stairs.

I couldn't believe it! All I could think was, "No, don't let her get away. Make her answer your question!" As I was wrestling within, I pulled on the scholar's arm and said in a low voice, "Hey, why didn't you nail the lady?" Why didn't you press the point and not let her get away until she answered?"

Quietly and calmly he put his hand on my shoulder and whispered, "But, Chuck, that wouldn't have been fair. That wouldn't have been very loving—now would it?"

Wham! The quiet rebuke left me reeling. I shall *never* forget that moment. And to complete the story, you'll be interested to know that in less than twenty minutes he was sitting with the woman alone, tenderly and carefully speaking with her about the Lord Jesus Christ. She sat in rapt attention. He, the gracious peacemaker, had won a hearing. And I, the scalp-snatcher, had learned an unforgettable lesson.

How good are you at sowing seeds of peace? You may not be called on to ward off international conflict, but you will have opportunities to do something far more vital: bringing inner peace to troubled hearts.

This is what Jesus modeled. In the gospels, we don't

find him settling disputes or negotiating contracts. But we do see him cultivating inward harmony through acts of love: washing the feet of men he knew would betray and forsake him; having lunch with a corrupt tax official; honoring a sinful woman whom society had scorned. Jesus built bridges by healing hurts. He prevented conflict by touching the interior. He cultivated harmony by sowing seeds of peace in fertile hearts.

Think for a moment about the people who make up your world. Picture their faces: your spouse, your children, your parents, your golf buddies, your neighbor, the receptionist at work. May I tell you something you know or may have forgotten? Someone in your world is hurting and needs a word of peace. The daily push and shove of the world has a way of leaving us worked over and worn out.

James says that "peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness." Do you want to see a miracle? Then plant a word of love deep in someone's life. Nurture it with a smile and a prayer, and watch what happens. Sowing seeds of peace is like sowing beans. We don't know why it works; we just know it does. Seeds are planted and the topsoils of hurt are shoved away. So never underestimate the power of a seed.

In May, we attended a pastors conference in Canada. While we were there, Dr. Larry Crabb shared a story with me that I shall never forget about seeds that were sown in his life many years ago, seeds that had produced a harvest of righteousness.

Larry Crabb stuttered when he was young. He had particular difficulty with the letters "l" and "p." This was especially hard, because his name was Larry, and he went to Plymouth-Whitemarsh junior high school, in Pennsylvania. He has already published this story in one of his books, and I will quote his own words:

In the ninth grade, I was elected president of our junior high student body. During an assembly of the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades—several hundred students—I was beckoned by the principal to join him on stage for an induction ceremony. Standing nervously in front of the squirming, bored crowd, I was told to repeat after the principal the words, "I, Larry Crabb, of Plymouth-Whitemarsh Junior High School, do hereby promise..." That's how the principal said it. My version was a bit different: "I, L-L-L-L-Larry Crabb, of P-P-P-P-Plymouth Whitemarsh Junior High School, do hereby p-p-p-promise..." The principle was sympathetically perplexed, my favorite English teacher wanted to cry, a few students laughed out loud, most were awkwardly amused, some felt bad for me—and I died a thousand deaths. I decided right then that public speaking was not for me.

A short time later, our church celebrated the Lord's Supper in a Sunday morning worship service. It was customary in our congregation to encourage young men to enter into the privilege of worship by standing and praying aloud. That particular Sunday I sensed the pressure of the saints (not, I fear, the leading of the Spirit),

and I responded by unsteadily leaving my chair, for the first time, with the intention of praying.

Filled less with worship than with nervousness, I found my theology becoming confused to the point of heresy. I remember thanking the Father for hanging on the cross and praising Christ for triumphantly bringing the Spirit from the grave. Stuttering throughout, I finally thought of the word *Amen* (perhaps the first evidence of the Spirit's leading), said it, and sat down. I recall staring at the floor, too embarrassed to look around, and solemnly vowing *never again* to pray or speak aloud in front of a group. Two strikes were enough.

When the service was over, I darted toward the door, not wishing to encounter an elder who might feel obliged to correct my twisted theology. But I was not quick enough. An older Christian man named Jim Dunbar intercepted me, put his arm on my shoulder, and cleared his throat to speak. I remember thinking to myself, "Here it comes. Oh well, just endure it and get to the car." I listened carefully to this godly gentleman speak words that I can repeat verbatim today, more than twenty years later.

"Larry," he said, "there's one thing I want you to know. Whatever you do for the Lord, I'm behind you one thousand percent." Then he walked away.

Even as I write these words, my eyes fill with tears. I have yet to tell that story to an audience without at least mildly choking. Those words were life words. They had power. They reached deep into my being. My resolve never again to speak publicly weakened instantly.

Since the day those words were spoken, God has led me into a ministry in which I regularly address and pray before crowds of all sizes. I do it without stuttering. I love it. Not only death, but also life lies in the power of the tongue.

God intends that we be people who use words to encourage one another. A well-timed word has the power to urge a runner to finish the race, to rekindle hope when despair has set in, to spark a bit of warmth in an otherwise cold life, to trigger healthful self-evaluation in someone who doesn't think much about his shortcomings, to renew confidence when problems have the upper hand.

Never underestimate the power of a seed. My prayer is that we would begin, even today, to sow seeds of peace wherever we go. St. Francis of Assisi expressed the same desire when he prayed:

*Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.*

*Where there is hatred, let me sow love,*

*Where there is injury, pardon,*

*Where there is doubt, faith,*

*Where there is despair, hope,*

*Where there is darkness, light,*

*Where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine master, grant that I may not so much seek to be  
consoled as to console,*

*To be understood, as to understand,*

*To be loved, as to love.*

*For it is in giving that we receive,*

*It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,*

*And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

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# CALLED TO SERVE A PERSECUTING WORLD

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Catalog No. 1086

Matthew 5:10-16

Eighth Message

Gary Vanderet

October 6, 1996

I frequently run into believers who express surprise that their Christian life is difficult. They were under the impression that circumstances would improve, that God would go soft on those who had "left everything" to follow him, and that life would get easier as they grew in the Lord. For some, this is an article of faith. But God doesn't affirm that creed. He promised to safeguard our souls. He never said he would save us from the hard times.

It is a fact that Christians suffer. Oftentimes, crosses, arenas, and scaffolds have been the earthly reward for a job well done. Painful, mortifying, expensive things keep happening to believers. "Sorrow upon sorrow" is the lonely, invisible burden of every Christian worker, and at times the hardest tests are farther along.

Listen to these moving verses by William Blake:

*Joy and woe are woven fine  
A clothing for the soul divine,  
Under every grief and pine  
Runs a joy with silken twine.*

The Bible is quite clear that both joy and woe are part of the fabric of the life which God weaves and lovingly fits as perfect clothing for his children. This is a mysterious and paradoxical thing, but what a great comfort it is know that God is the weaver.

This our topic this morning as we examine the eighth and final beatitude of Jesus, from Matthew 5:10-12:

**"Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."** (Matt 5:10-12, NASB)

It may seem strange that here Jesus moves from talking about peacemaking to persecution, from the work of reconciliation to the experience of hostility. Yet, however diligently we may try to make peace with some people, they refuse to live at peace with us. Indeed, some take the initiative to oppose us, to revile and slander us. This occurs, not because of Christians' foibles or idiosyncrasies, but for "righteousness sake," and "on account of Me"; that is, because the enemies of the cross find distasteful the righteousness for which we hunger and thirst, and they have rejected the Christ whom we seek to follow. The persecution that Jesus speaks of,

then, is the clash between two irreconcilable value systems.

Notice that Jesus does not say, "Blessed are those who persecute because you because you are obnoxious." And some Christians are downright obnoxious. Ray Stedman used to quote this jingle on occasion,

To live above with saints we love,  
Oh that will be glory.  
But to live below with saints we know,  
Well, that's another story.

Some Christians are hard to live with, because they are uptight and self righteous. Jesus is not talking about that kind of person. He is referring to people who live the truth and suffer for it.

How does Jesus expect Christians to react under persecution? Here are his words: "Rejoice, and be glad," he said. We are not to retaliate, like an unbeliever. We are not to sulk like a child, to lick our wounds in self pity, to grin and bear it, like a stoic, or pretend we enjoy it, like a masochist. We are to rejoice as a Christian should rejoice, and even "leap for joy."

Why? First of all, Jesus says, "for your reward in heaven is great." We may lose everything on earth, but we shall inherit everything in heaven. Persecution is a token of our genuineness, a certificate of Christian authenticity. Jesus goes on to say, "for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." If we are persecuted today, we belong to a noble succession. But the main reason we ought to be rejoicing, according to Jesus, is because we are suffering, as he says, "on account of Me"—on account of our loyalty to him and his standards of truth and righteousness. The apostles learned this lesson. They knew that wounds and hurts are medals of honor.

The righteousness for which we are being persecuted is the righteousness set out in the preceding seven beatitudes. The world cannot tolerate such a life. Poverty of spirit and brokenness run counter to the pride of the unbelieving heart. It is the self sufficient who are admired by the world.

When we began our series eight weeks ago, I shared with you a modern man's version of the beatitudes, which is the exact opposite of the lifestyle Christians are called to follow. Let me read it to you again:

Blessed are the self made and the self sufficient, because they did it all by themselves.

Blessed are those who play it cool, because they avoid being hassled by life.

Blessed are those who demand their rights, because if they don't, someone else will.

Blessed are those who go for all the gusto, because you only go around once.

Blessed are those who show no mercy, because anyone dumb enough to get caught deserves it.

Blessed are those who bend the rules, because after all, everyone is doing it.

Blessed are those who intimidate others, because if you don't, someone else will grab your chips.

Blessed are those who despise the good, because everyone knows that good guys finish last.

The values and standards of Jesus are in direct conflict with the values and standards of the world. The world says it is the rich that are blessed, not the poor; the happy go lucky and the carefree, not those who take evil so seriously that they mourn over it; the strong and the brash, not the meek and the gentle; the full, not the hungry; those who mind their own business, not those who care enough to show mercy and make peace; those who attain their ends even, if necessary, by devious means, not the pure in heart who refuse to compromise their integrity; those who are secure and popular, and live at ease, not those who have to suffer persecution.

Notice that this reference to persecution has the distinction of being a double beatitude. Jesus states it, first, in the third person, like the other seven ("Blessed are those"), and then he repeats it in the direct speech of the second person ("Blessed are you"). Matthew Henry, the Puritan commentator, thought the reason Jesus repeated himself was because the statement is so incredible. He may be right. The repetition of the beatitude, its personalization, and its position at the end of the list highlight its supreme importance.

Since all the beatitudes describe what every Christian disciple is intended to be, we conclude that the condition of being despised and rejected, slandered and persecuted, is as much a normal mark of Christian discipleship as being pure in heart or merciful. Every Christian is to be a peacemaker, and every Christian is to expect opposition. Those who hunger for righteousness will suffer for the righteousness they crave. Jesus said so here and elsewhere. So did his apostles Peter and Paul. It has been so in every age. We need to remember the complimentary woe which Luke records: "Woe to you when all men speak well of you." Universal popularity was as much the lot of the false prophets as persecution was of the true.

This is a difficult truth, and this is why Jesus took time to prepare his disciples before he left. In John 15, he warned them: "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before [it hated] you." If you get the cold shoulder from the world, if you feel its hostility,

you are in good company, because the world didn't like the Lord, either. Jesus was put to death for living perfectly. We should not expect any better treatment. So don't be surprised if the world doesn't like you, appreciate you, reward you or promote you for your behavior. They didn't do any of those things with Jesus, either.

Isn't it odd that the kindest, most thoughtful Man who ever lived, who never wronged anyone, was so hated by the world that they put him to death? Jesus says that if you are experiencing hostility, know that he experienced it as well—so don't take it personally. New Christians are often surprised at the turn their lives take when they become believers. They expect their old friends to be happy for them now that they have become Christians, but they are not. It is because they don't understand.

I have spent some of my most rewarding years in ministry working with high school students. It is such an exciting ministry, to be able to make a difference in students' lives at such a critical time. I remember a particular girl who started coming to our group some years ago. This young woman was pretty wild. She was into partying and alcohol, and she was doing some drugs. But she was attracted to what she saw in the lives of some kids in the group, and she was very responsive to truth. She came regularly, and the truth began to make an impact in her life. One day, her mother telephoned me and said, "I don't know what you are doing to my daughter, but I don't like it. I want her to have fun and enjoy life. I don't want her to become a religious fanatic."

As I hung up the phone, I was reminded of Peter's words, which parallel what Jesus is saying: "For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in sensuality, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you."

In Isaiah 57:4, the prophet says that unbelievers will stick out their tongues at you. He actually uses that expression. They will hiss at you. That is the first thing to remember in understanding the hostility of the world. Don't be surprised; don't take it personally; they treated Jesus the same way.

Jesus continues, in John 15:19:

**"If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also."** (John 15:19-20)

Another reason we experience hostility is that we are different from what we once were. The world loves worldly people. If we become authentically Christian, and begin to operate as Jesus did, the world is not going

to like us. If we do nothing wrong, they are still going to hate us, because the one unrelenting pressure of society around us is to conform.

Jesus is saying that if we are authentically Christian we are going to act in ways that distress people in the world. So don't we surprised by their negative reaction.

Few people who have lived in this century have understood and expressed this better than Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Christian martyr who was executed in the Flossenbergl concentration camp days before it was liberated following World War II. Here is part of what he wrote about suffering:

Suffering, then, is the badge of true discipleship. The disciple is not above his master... That is why Luther reckoned suffering among the marks of the true church, and one of the memorandas drawn up in preparation for the Augsburg Confession similarly defines the church as the community of those "who are persecuted and martyred for the Gospel's sake" ... Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not at all surprising that Christians are called upon to suffer. In fact, it is a joy and a token of His grace.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon went through a very depressing period once when he was subjected to virulent abuse for the things he was preaching. His wife took these words of Matthew 5:10-12, and wrote them in large letters and pasted them on the ceiling above their bed, so that the first thing the great preacher saw in the morning was the words of Jesus.

And what is to be our response to this persecuting world? We are to witness to it. Matthew 5:13:

**"You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty again? It is good for nothing anymore, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do men light a lamp, and put it under the peck-measure, but on the lampstand; and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven. (5:13-16)**

If the beatitudes describe the essential character of the disciples of Jesus, these "salt and light" metaphors describe their influence for good in the world. And yet the very notion that the Christian described in the beatitudes can have a significant influence in this tough world is a bit shocking. What lasting good can the poor and the meek, the mourners and the merciful, and those who try to make peace not war have upon the world? They will be overwhelmed, won't they? What can be accomplished by a people whose only passion is an appetite for righteousness, and whose only weapon is purity of heart? Aren't such people too feeble to achieve any-

thing, especially because they are such a small minority in the world?

It is evident that Jesus did not share this skeptical viewpoint. The world will undoubtedly persecute the church, yet it is the church's calling to serve this persecuting world. Rudolf Steir put it this way, "This must be your only retaliation—love and truth for hatred and lies." Incredible as it may sound, Jesus referred to that handful of Palestinian peasants as the salt of *the earth* and the light of *the world*, so far reaching would their influence be.

We are like salt and light when we act as Jesus has described here in these beatitudes. Salt was used in that day as a preservative. The only way to preserve meat and arrest the spread of corruption was to salt it. Jesus says that is how the spread of evil is arrested in our world—by living as he has described in the beatitudes. Do you want to make an impact upon your community, neighborhood, office, or school? Then live this way. It doesn't take many people living like this to have an effect on society. Salt can exist in small amounts in a very large medium—and it does its work far beyond its size. One or two people working in an office and living this way can change the whole climate of a company. I have seen this happen where men and women determine to be righteous and they arrest the spread of corruption.

Likewise, says Jesus, Christians are like light. No one puts light under a bowl to hide it. They let it shine, because light dispels darkness. According to the apostle Paul, "the god of this world has blinded the eyes of unbelievers." They really believe that the way to get ahead is to push and shove and demand their rights. If you assert yourself, they say, if you are hard fisted and hard headed, you will make it to the top. But they are living in the darkness—and the way to dispel the darkness is to live as Jesus describes in the beatitudes.

What Jesus is doing here is giving us the key to evangelism. Do you want to have an effect on your campus or your neighborhood? Then live like this! He tells us, in verse 16: "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and *glorify your Father who is in heaven*." I believe that is the most significant statement in this section. When we live like this, people will see that there is something different about us, something that can't be attributed to our personality, education, intellect or cultural background. People will recognize that it is supernatural, that it comes from another source.

The wording is very significant here. Jesus says that Christians (and Christians alone) are the light of the world. Modern man is only contributing to the darkness by his efforts to dispel it. We, and only we, because we know the King, and we have his light, are the means by which corruption is arrested, darkness dispelled, and people are brought into a loving relationship with God.

These metaphors make it obvious that the church and



the world are very distinct communities. The world is a dark place, with little or no light of its own. It talks a lot about its "enlightenment," but much of its boasted light is, in reality, darkness. The world also manifests a constant tendency to deteriorate; it cannot stop itself from going bad. Only salt introduced from the outside can prevent that. Christians are that salt—but our effectiveness depends on our saltiness.

Jesus' assertion that the church is the earth's salt and light sounds audacious in a society where so few take churchgoing seriously anymore. But that is what he said: God's people are the element that arrests the spread of corruption in the world. We alone are the substance that dispels illusion, and its offspring, despair. The church is still the only agency in society that can cleanse the world and correct the lies that debase it. Christians are the only ones who can make visible to the world the invisible Jesus.

The real business of the church is done by men and women whose inner lives are characterized by truth, righteousness, humility, and servanthood, and who love each other as God loves us, with a fierce and determined love.

The devil wants to thwart that business if he can. That's why we often are subjected to a hard time from the most unexpected place—within the church itself. That's why we sometimes rub each other the wrong way, and why even committed Christians have problems getting along. If you were the devil and wanted to subvert God's plan to salvage the world, whom would you try to trip up? The agents by whom he plans to salvage it, of course!

So the devil penetrates by finding willing agents within the church, and he indoctrinates them, suggesting ungodly ways and means of dealing with their difficulties with one another. He makes them want to be noticed, so they get hurt when they're overlooked; they smart when they're crossed, corrected or criticized; they harbor grudges, nurse grievances, and wallow in self-pity; they gossip about others and blame them for their pain rather than recognizing God's hand in all things. They choose their own kind rather than the lowly and the unlovely. They insist on being the center of attention rather than serving on the edge.

That happens all the time, doesn't it? Those who are seduced in this way forget that God was once a Lamb, and that he overcame injustice by humility and meekness. They forget about giving up their rights to control things and be in charge, and about loving those who don't love them, as our Lord did. Unlike him, they look for the inside track, the special favor. They search for selfish advantage rather than someone to serve. They forget what it means to be concealed and content, without praise or notice, to be undervalued and sometimes slighted. When this happens, relationships break down, the church begins to break up, and our influence on the world disappears.

That is Satan's strategy, to get a church to go bad from within, so that God himself has to judge it. The people may gather, the piano may play, the preacher may pray, but the lights have gone out. May we not be ignorant of Satan's devices. These eight beatitudes of Jesus are the Christian's hope for affecting this world. Let us remember, then, our own brokenness and poverty, and allow God's Word to penetrate our inner life, so that we may not lose our saltiness.

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# HOW GOOD DO WE HAVE TO BE?

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Catalog No. 1087

Matthew 5:17-20

Ninth Message

Gary Vanderet

February 16, 1997

There is a growing sense in our day that there are no absolutes, that anything and everything is permitted. We have broken with our traditional and spiritual past and are lurching into a new dark age of uncertain and bewildering character. Evil influences lead us into ever deepening confusion. A clutter of distortions, half truths, outright lies, and an added notion of tolerance in all things, demand that we accept everyone's version of the truth. There are no absolute standards; everything is changeable, just like the weather.

G. K. Chesterton once observed that morality, like art, consists of drawing a straight line. Today, no one seems to know where to draw the lines. Once there were boundaries and absolutes. There were laws to protect every girl, every boy, every cat. Now, traditional notions of human sexuality and public decency have been so radically and thoroughly warped that most people do not know what is uplifting and beautiful and good. We struggle with questions like, Who knows which sexual proclivities are preferable? Is teenage sex all right? Is it good for Sally to have two mommies? Is daddy's new roommate okay?

There is no way to put an end to the confusion, because there is no final authority. We have lost the values and virtues that once prevented us from pandering to our darker instincts. We have pushed ourselves to new levels of personal and social wickedness. As David Roper says, "All of our doing without God has finally outdone us."

Who is at fault for this deterioration of values? Is it the media? The educators? The politicians?

As we return to our series in the Sermon on the Mount, I want to remind you where we left off last September. Jesus said: "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty {again}? It is good for nothing anymore, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men." Jesus was addressing the nation of Israel, which had lost its savor. In AD 70, our Lord's prophetic words came true, when Jerusalem was trampled under foot by the Romans. What he said is equally true today with regard to the church: the church has lost its influence in the world. If we are ever to rebuild the soul of our nation, we must first rebuild the soul of the church.

The Sermon on the Mount is the best known, and probably the least obeyed, of the teachings of Jesus. The words which he uttered on that day are the nearest thing to a manifesto setting out what he wanted his fol-

lowers to become and what he wanted them to do. This sermon is the best explanation, and the clearest illustration, of what true Christianity is all about. Last fall, we spent eight weeks examining the beatitudes, those sayings which Jesus identified as the characteristics of the citizens of his kingdom, and the influence they would have in the world as they demonstrated those qualities in their daily lives.

In the rest of chapter 5, to which we now come, Jesus further defines that Christian character in terms of righteousness. These verses are important not only to help define what righteousness is, they shed light on the relationship between the New Testament and the Old, between the gospel and the law.

We pick up Jesus' discourse in Matthew 5:17,

**"Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. (Matt 5:17, NASB)**

In these words, Jesus is referring to the entire Old Testament. This phrase, "the Law or the prophets," was how the Jews referred to all of the Hebrew scriptures. They divided the Bible into three parts: the Law: i.e. the first five books, which were written by Moses; the prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, some of the more prominent of the prophets; while the rest of the books were called the writings.

Jesus' public ministry had just recently begun, but already his contemporaries were deeply disturbed by what they perceived to be his attitude toward the Old Testament. Perhaps he had already stirred up controversy over his teaching with regard to the Sabbath.

From the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, people were struck by his authority. "What is this? they asked. A new teaching! With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him" (Mark 1:27). They wanted to know the relationship between his authority and the authority of the Law of Moses. Was he setting himself up as an authority over against the sacred Law, the Word of God? It seemed that way to some. Hence their question, spoken or unspoken, which Jesus now answers unequivocally, saying: "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets."

People should not think for one moment that Jesus came to do away with the Old Testament. He clearly says that the Old Testament scriptures have authority. That is why we as Christians accept it—because Jesus subscribed to its authority. As Christians, therefore, we

can have no other authority. If Jesus is Lord, then we have to be subject to him as Lord and we have to accept his perspective on all things. So when he says the Old Testament is authoritative for Christians, then it is. Far from coming to earth to abolish the Law, Jesus says, he came to “fulfill” the Scriptures. The verb means literally “to fill.” Rather than contradict the Law, Jesus’ life and teachings were an explanation and a filling up of them.

The relationship of Jesus Christ to all the different kinds of teaching in the OT differs, but the word “fulfillment” covers them all.

First, the Old Testament contains doctrinal teaching. The Torah (which means “revealed instruction”), the Old Testament, does indeed instruct about God and man and salvation. All the great biblical doctrines are there. Yet the Old Testament is but a partial revelation. Jesus “fulfilled” it all in the sense that he brought it to completion by his person, his teaching, and his work. Bishop Ryle summed it up in these words: “The Old Testament is the Gospel in the bud, the New Testament is the Gospel in full flower. The Old Testament is the Gospel in the blade; the New Testament is the Gospel in full ear.”

Second, the Old Testament contains predictive prophecy. Much of it looks forward to the days of the Messiah, yet this was only anticipatory. Jesus “fulfilled” it all in the sense that what was predicted came to pass in him. The first statement of his public ministry was, “Fulfilled is the time” (Mark 1: 14). Again and again, he claimed that the Scriptures bore witness to him. Matthew emphasizes this throughout his gospel by repeatedly using the phrase, “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophets.”

The climax of all this was Jesus’ death on the cross. In that one event the whole ceremonial system of the Old Testament found its perfect fulfillment. On that day the ceremonies ceased. Yet, as Calvin pointed out, “It was only the use of them that was abolished, for their meaning was more fully confirmed.” They were but a “shadow” of what was to come; the “substance” belonged to Christ.

Third, the Old Testament contains ethical precepts, or the moral law of God. Yet these precepts often are misunderstood, and even more often disobeyed. Jesus “fulfilled” them by obeying them and by explaining their true interpretation. His purpose was not to change the Law, and still less to annul it, but “to reveal the full depth of meaning that it was intended to hold.”

Notice that Jesus goes so far as to link the continuity of the Old Testament with that of the universe. Verse 18:

**“For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished. (5:18)**

Here Jesus says that as long as the universe exists, the Scripture stands. The practical import of these words is

that Christians must always go back to the Scripture for their authority. Even its minutest details are important: “not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away.” You might be more familiar with the King James Version, which says, “not a jot or tittle.” The jot is the Hebrew *Yod*, the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which is but a tiny mark. The tittle, or the horn, is a projection on a Hebrew character that distinguishes one letter from another.

The point Jesus is making is that even the words of Scripture are important. They had authority. For Jesus and the apostles, the Word of God was normative—and that authority extends to the very words of Scripture.

We shall see in our next studies that that authority is not a theoretical exercise: it speaks to relevant issues in our lives. And acknowledging the authority of Scripture means we must submit ourselves and our behavior to it. That is the point Jesus is making in this section. He says that his purpose is to bring out the full meaning of the Old Testament. His life and teaching filled out and explained those Scriptures to their fullest meaning.

Having emphasized the enduring validity of the Law, Jesus now goes on to draw certain implications arising from that for his disciples. Verse 19:

**“Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (5:19)**

Because he had come not to abolish but to fulfill the Law, and because not an iota or dot will pass from the Law until all has been fulfilled, *therefore*, according to Jesus, greatness in the kingdom of God will be measured by conformity to the law.

Next, Jesus makes a statement that most certainly astonished his disciples, as it astonishes Christians today. Verse 20:

**“For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses {that} of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. (5:20)**

The scribes and Pharisees were famous for their righteousness. Obedience to God’s Law was the very passion of their lives. They calculated that the Law contains two hundred and forty eight commandments and three hundred and sixty five prohibitions, and they aspired to keep all of them. How then can Christian righteousness actually *exceed* pharisaic righteousness? And how can this superior Christian righteousness be made a condition for entering God’s kingdom? Does this not teach a doctrine of salvation by good works and so contradict the first beatitude, which says the kingdom belongs to “the poor in spirit” who have nothing, not even righteousness, to plead?

The answer to these questions is not difficult to find. Christian righteousness far surpasses pharisaic righteousness *in kind* rather than in degree. It is not that

Christians succeed in keeping two hundred and forty eight commandments when the best Pharisees may have kept only two hundred and thirty. No, Christian righteousness is greater than pharisaic righteousness because it is deeper: it is a righteousness of the heart. The Pharisees were content with an external and formal obedience, a rigid conformity to the letter of the Law, but here Jesus teaches that God's demands are far more radical. The righteousness which is pleasing to him is an inward righteousness of mind and motive, for "the Lord looks at the heart."

It was this new heart-righteousness which the prophets foresaw as one of the blessings of the Messianic age. This is the heart of the New Covenant that was promised by Jeremiah, when he said: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts" (31:33). How would God do that? He told Ezekiel: "I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes" (36:27). Thus, God's two promises to put his Law within us and his Spirit within us coincide. We must not imagine, as some do today, that when we have the Spirit, we can dispense with the Law, for what the Spirit does in our hearts is, precisely, write God's Law there. So these terms, "Spirit," "Law," "righteousness" and "heart," belong together.

One mistake many people make is they fail to distinguish between "law" and "legalism." Legalism is a wrong use of the Law. Legalism perverts the Law, making it into a way of salvation, or merely an external code, or both. What Jesus repudiated was Pharisaic legalism, not the Mosaic Law. His opposition to the morality of the Pharisees was not that their view of the Law was authoritarian, nor even that it was absolute, but that it was external. They were trying to make the Law less frightening and more manageable by organizing it into a set of man-made rules. They were obsessed with external, ritual purification: clean hands, clean foods, clean vessels. But Jesus revealed that God's standards were much higher and his scrutiny much deeper than the Pharisees realized.

The rest of Matthew 5 contains examples of this greater, or rather, deeper, righteousness. It is made up of six parallel paragraphs, each of which is introduced by the same formula, the words of Jesus: "*You have heard that it was said...But I say to you...*" He is not inaugurating a new law, one that contradicts the Law of Moses. He is contradicting, not the Scriptures, but tradition, not God's Word, but the false interpretation of which the Scribes and Pharisees were guilty. In each case they were attempting to reduce the challenge of the divine Law to suit their convenience, either by restricting what it commanded or by extending what it permitted. They were tampering with the Law to make it less exacting. The disciple of Jesus, however, must accept the full force and all the implications of the Law.

No, Jesus did not contradict the Law of Moses. That, in effect, was what the Pharisees were doing. What Jesus did, rather, was explain the true meaning of the mo-

ral law—with all its uncomfortable implications. He extended the commands which the Pharisees were restricting and restricted the permissions which they were extending. To him, Moses' Law was God's Law. Its validity was permanent and its authority must be accepted. In the Sermon on the Mount, as Calvin correctly expressed it, we see Jesus not as "a new legislator, but as the faithful expounder of a law which had been already given." The Pharisees had "obsured" the Law; Jesus "restored it to its integrity."

Because we are "not under the law" does not mean that we have no relationship to the Law. What these words mean is that as Christians we don't look to the Law for our justification or our sanctification. It would be useless to do so, because of the Law's "weakness." Paul says in Galatians: "God has done what the Law, *weakened by the flesh*, could not do." The weakness is not in the Law, but in us. Because of our fallen nature, we cannot, by ourselves, keep the Law. The Law, then, can never justify us or sanctify us. Instead, by sending his Son and his Spirit, God has done for us and in us what the Law could not accomplish. God justifies us through the death of his Son; and he sanctifies us through the indwelling of his Spirit.

God's way of acceptance is not accomplished through striving to be good enough by trying to obey the Law; rather, it is by means of the finished work of Christ. His way of holiness is not gained by striving to obey the Law, but through the inward work of the Holy Spirit. If we were to describe a Christian in terms of a tree, one who is a believer could be said to look more like a fruit tree than a Christmas tree. Our holiness is not an artificial human decoration; it is natural process of fruit bearing, by the power of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, Jesus told his disciples in the Upper Room: "I am the Vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

Man's greatest need is to know what his greatest need is! We think we can get by with a little churchgoing, a little patch applied here and there, a little mending, a little polishing and painting up the outside. If this is how we think, we are ignorant of the extent of the fall.

Theologians have two terms for sinfulness. They talk about "original sin" and "total depravity." Original sin doesn't mean that we sin in original ways. Most of us sin like everyone else. "Original" sin means that we are sinful in our origins. We come into the world with a proclivity for doing wrong. We are like a baseball with a spin on it: sooner or later we break, and the break is down and out. Total depravity simply means that sin touches the totality of our being. If sin were a color, we would be that shade of color all over. We sin because we are sinful!

"The one spiritual disease," G. K. Chesterton wrote, "is thinking that one is quite well." That is why Jesus re-

served his harshest words for those would not admit there was something basically wrong with them, those who still believed there was something good about them that God ought to accept. Amazingly, it was the clergy of Jesus' day who had this problem. "Hypocrites" was what he called them. The word seems harsh unless we understand its meaning. A hypocrite is one who is outwardly correct but inwardly corrupt. The Pharisees taught decency, but their hearts were defiled. Their rules could not correct the state of their own hearts, nor could they correct others.

The problem with sin is that it lies *within* us. Nothing external can cure it. Rules don't work. In fact, they only make matters worse. And yet people keep insisting that traditions or rites or rituals will modify us. But they won't. Even our disciplines fail us. In our determination to right some wrong we may read the Bible, pray, memorize Scripture, or go to church more often. But, as good as these activities are, they can't change us. They can only draw us closer to the One who can. The way to change is to ask him to change us by his own working—from within.

When we come to Christ, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within us—and the Holy Spirit is nothing more and nothing less than the Lord Jesus himself. In fact, that is the work of the Holy Spirit: to come and make the life of Jesus continuing and real. That is what Paul

describes as the "treasure" within earthen vessels. Do you realize that the same Lord Jesus who walked here on the earth, and who did those mighty works, now lives in you? That is the genius of the Christian life. We grow and become effective by laying hold of God's power which resides within us.

The cable cars of San Francisco do not have engines to drive them up and down those formidable hills. In the belly of each car sits a clamp, which is attached to a lever. When the brakeman pulls back on the lever, the clamp grabs on to a cable that runs beneath the street. It is the same with Christians. We have no independent source of power within ourselves. We cannot change our own lives, our own faulty behavior, never mind the world's. But there is an endless cable inside, the risen life of our Lord Jesus, manifested through the Holy Spirit, which is available to us. All we have to do is clamp onto that life for it to become available to us. This is what will enable us to stand in the face of adversity; to do whatever it is we are called to do; to have the moral courage to make decisions that are tough, but which we know are right.

Perhaps you have not yet invited Christ into your life. Will you admit to him today your own poverty of spirit, and claim his work on the cross in your behalf? If you do, he promises to forgive you and cleanse you of all your sins.

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# THE HEAVINESS OF HATRED

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Catalog No. 1088

Matthew 5:21-26

Tenth Message

Gary Vanderet

February 23, 1997

Some Christians seem to try too hard to be good. They're upright, but they're uptight. For such, goodness is a stern, demanding business. They're chaste, honest, sober, respectable, Bible-toting, churchgoing, hymn-singing people, but everything seems out of phase. As William James said, "Their faith exists as a dull habit." They have the appearance of righteousness, with its self-imposed worship, obvious humility, and harsh treatment of their bodies, but they lack the genuine love that springs from having contact with God.

True goodness is not found in doing extraordinary things, it is in doing ordinary things in an extraordinary way. Pascal said, "The strengths of a man's virtue must not be measured by his efforts, but by his ordinary life." True goodness is not so much a matter of overt religious behavior as it is exhibiting a gracious, winsome spirit in everything one does.

Jesus was inclined to be stern with those who wore their religion on their sleeves. As we learned in our last study in the Sermon on the Mount, creeds, rites, rituals, and edicts can never modify behavior. Authentic goodness is much more subtle. Here is how Howard Butt put it: "It is not a way of doing special things; it is a special way of doing everything."

In the next few weeks, we will be exploring what really goes on beneath the surface in people. That fact that someone attends church and sings in the choir is not a measure of his or her spirituality. The absence of these things may indicate a problem, but their presence is no guarantee of anything.

Consider the quality of your relationships. How do you impact others? How do others impact you? Make it a concern of your ministry to encourage people to think through how they are perceived by others.

The purpose of the Scriptures, Jesus says, is to produce in us a love for others. Love, therefore, is the distinguishing mark of citizens of the kingdom of heaven. If we don't love people, then we have missed the entire point of the Scriptures. That is what Paul says in 1 Timothy: "The goal of our instruction is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." Bible study ought to make us more loving, not smarter or better able to produce eschatological charts or forecast what is going to happen next. Theology is important, but the point of studying Scripture is not to get our theology correct. As the hymn puts it, "beyond the sacred page, we see you, Lord." The purpose of all Bible study is to know God and become conformed to the image of his Son.

Paul warned Timothy in his second letter to "flee youthful lusts." The apostle was not talking about sexual lust, but about the tendency of young men to argue and debate endlessly over issues and never come to any conclusions.

If that is how we act, the Word of God will never have its intended effect on us.

The remaining verses of Matthew 5 set out a number of examples of this greater, or rather, deeper, righteousness. In our last study, we saw that Christian righteousness is greater than pharisaic righteousness because, being a righteousness of the heart, it is deeper. The Pharisees were content with an external and formal obedience, a rigid conformity to the letter of the Law, but Jesus declares that God's demands are far more radical than that. The righteousness that is pleasing to him is an inward righteousness of mind and motive, for "the Lord looks on the heart."

What follows in the rest of chapter 5 is Jesus' unfolding of the Law to show its original intent. The text comprises six parallel paragraphs, each of which is introduced by the same formula of words: "You have that it was said...But I say to you." As we have already noted, Jesus is not inaugurating a new law, nor is he contradicting the Law of Moses. What he is doing is taking well known Old Testament passages and expounding upon their original intent. He is not contradicting the Scriptures, but tradition; not God's Word, but the false interpretation of which the Scribes and Pharisees were guilty. In each case, these religious men of Jesus' day were attempting to reduce the challenge of the divine Law to suit their convenience, either by restricting what it commanded or extending what it permitted. They were tampering with the Law to make it less exacting. But in his discourse, Jesus plumbs the deeper level of the Law to show God's original intent.

Jesus begins with the Ten Commandments, the most succinct statement of the will of God, because that is the place where any Jew would begin in a discussion of the Law. And he begins in the middle of the Ten Commandments, with the second table of the Law, which deal with personal relationships, because that is where we see how love operates. We pick up his words at verse 21 of Matthew 5. He starts with the sixth commandment, the prohibition against murder. Jesus is a good teacher. He first quotes the text, in v 21; then he interprets it, in v 22; finally, he applies it, in vv 23-26:

**"You have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not commit murder' [Here he is quoting Exodus 13:20] and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever shall say to his brother, 'Raca,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever shall say, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the hell of fire. (Matt 5:21-22, NASB)**

Jesus says that the Old Testament prohibits murder, but the intent of that law is to protect one's brother from hos-



tility. Hostility can be revealed in ways other than murder. God still has to protect my brother from my anger, because while I may not commit murder, I can show my dislike for him in other ways. Here is a brother who is created in the image of God, and while my behavior toward him in terms of the Law may be absolutely correct (I have never laid a hand on him; I have never tried to take his life), yet I can still miss the intent of the Law, because God wants me to be reconciled with him.

God wants us to deal with our hostility on other levels, too, hostility that is revealed by anger and resentment, and by the vocabulary we use towards someone who has treated us unjustly. *Raca* is a derisive Aramaic term meaning empty headed, which is an insult to a person's intelligence. At times we throw out terms like nitwit, blockhead, numbskull, bonehead, lame brain, words that may appear innocent, and often they are, but they indicate the intent of our heart. The word translated "fool" is the Greek term from which we get our word "moron." Jesus says if I call my brother a loser, and mean what I say, then I have missed the intent of the Law. A. B. Bruce probably preserves the major difference between the words in this statement: "*Raca* expresses contempt for a man's head = you stupid!; *more* expresses contempt for his heart and character = you scoundrel!"

These seemingly innocent terms reveal the intent of our hearts. If we say that we have never murdered anyone, and that we have no intention of doing so, and yet there are a number of people whom we don't like and are resentful of, and we show it by the terms we use toward them, then we are guilty of breaking the Law.

Jesus is saying that we need to deal with the intent of our hearts.

Angry thoughts and insulting words may never lead to the ultimate act of murder, yet they are tantamount to murder in God's sight. It was the apostle John who wrote: "Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer." Anger and insults are ugly symptoms of a desire to get rid of someone who stands in our way. Our thoughts, looks and words all indicate that, as we sometimes dare to say, we "wish so and so were dead." Such an evil wish is a breach of the sixth commandment. It renders the guilty person liable to the very penalties to which an actual murderer exposes himself, not in each case literally, as would be the case in a human law court, but before the bar of God.

Jesus is saying that we really need to deal with the intent of our hearts. The Law is given to teach us how to love our brethren. As children we chanted, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." But that's a lie. Words hurt deeply. Words rip and tear; they wound and hurt and cause irreparable pain and harm. As long as we permit anger to reside within, one early Christian wrote, "she continues to be the fruitful mother of many unhappy children."

Jesus then proceeds to give practical application of the principles he has just outlined. The point he makes is that if anger and insult are so serious and dangerous, then we must avoid them like the plague and take action as speedily as possible. He offers two illustrations: going to the temple to offer sacrifice to God (23-24); and going to court to answer the charges of an accuser (25-26).

**"If therefore you are presenting your offering at the al-**

**tar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, in order that your opponent may not deliver you to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Truly I say to you, you shall not come out of there, until you have paid up the last cent. (5:23-26)**

Jesus' illustration is expressed in the cultural terms of his own day, in which the temple still stood while its sacrifices were being offered. Perhaps it would be legitimate to render his illustrations in more modern terms:

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

Second, if you have an unpaid debt, and your creditor takes you to court to get his money back, come to terms with him quickly. Come to a settlement out of court. If you are on your way to court, pay your debt. Otherwise, once you reach the court, it will be too late. Your accuser will sue you before the judge and you will be handed over to the police and taken to jail, where you will remain until you have paid the last penny. Payment before imprisonment makes much more sense.

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

Jesus is assuming here that we have wronged our brother and our brother has something against us. Maybe he has wronged us, too. But in most of these conflicts, we will find it to be the case that we have wronged him as well. Maybe he initiated the action; he got under our skin and we reacted. But the point is, we are at fault, too. We have offended our brother, and he has something against us.

Jesus says if you come to the altar and your brother has something against you, go and be reconciled to him. In other words, your service to God is meaningless if you harbor animosity toward a brother or he harbors animosity toward you. You can teach a Sunday School class or sing in the choir, but if you are not reconciled to your brother, you have missed the whole point. You need to go to him and, as much as it depends on you, effect reconciliation. Leave your gift, because God is not interested in your service as long as you have a problem with your brother.

The second application deals with an adversary who has something against you. Here Jesus is speaking in legal terms. The first illustration is taken from life, a situation in which we have wronged a brother and he is upset with us and we need to be reconciled. Here, we have done some-

thing illegal and someone has a legal case against us. Jesus says, don't wait until the matter is settled in court. Go now, and settle accounts. If you don't, then you deserve to go to jail.

Yet how seldom we heed Christ's call for immediacy of action. If murder is a terrible crime, malicious anger and insult are terrible also. And so is every deed, word, look or thought by which we hurt or offend a fellow human being. We need to be more sensitive about these evils. We must never allow an estrangement to remain, still less to grow. We must not delay putting it right. We must not allow the sun to set on our anger. Immediately, as soon as we are conscious of a broken relationship, we must take the initiative to mend it, apologize for the grievance we have caused, pay the debt we have left unpaid, and make amends.

This is a good time for self examination. We need to keep short accounts. Maybe we need to telephone someone this afternoon and apologize for something we have done. That is what love does: it seeks reconciliation.

Following the service last Sunday, a good friend told me that during the communion time earlier this month, God spoke to him concerning a strained relationship he had with a brother. He hadn't even thought much about it until the Lord brought it to his mind. So he called this man and they spent a couple of hours together talking, listening, confessing, and even shedding some tears, reconciling with each other. He said that the man's wife told him afterwards how much that time had meant to her husband. She said he hadn't taken communion in church since they had fallen out.

Is there anyone whom you have something against? Or does someone have something against you? Perhaps you have not even expressed bitterness in words, yet you have harbored it in your heart. You need to correct that.

These then are the extremely practical instructions which Jesus draws out as the logical implications of the sixth commandment. We must take every possible positive step to live in peace and love with all men.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus lists thirteen evil things that flow out of the heart: "For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly." It is significant that all but the last two are sins against persons. Jesus chose that list deliberately. In their concentration on the external and the ceremonial, the Pharisees were as neglectful of love as they were of true morality. Their painstaking concern for ritual niceties was accompanied by a bitter, scornful, critical attitude.

Jesus taught that people matter more than things. On two occasions, he quoted Hosea 6:6: "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice." In other words, according to God's reckoning, compassion matters more than ceremonial rules and regulations; people matter more than things.

That is why Jesus continued to run into conflict with the Pharisees over issues such as Sabbath-breaking and fraternizing with sinners. In both cases, he broke their rules, be-

cause for him, love was the preeminent virtue. He cared deeply about the hungry, the sick and the sinful, and in order to serve their needs he was prepared to infringe upon the traditions of the Pharisees.

Has religion become so important for you that you have lost contact with the God who loves you? I believe that the main cause of problems in marriage and in the Body of Christ is unresolved, unconfessed anger. You cannot love your mate until you first love life, and you cannot begin to love life until you come into a relationship with the loving God who forgives you, cleanses you and fills you with his love.

As we conclude this morning, perhaps you would want to ask some hard questions of yourself. All of us have some unresolved anger in us, but the key is to reduce it to as low a level as possible. The following statements may help you determine the amount of unresolved anger in your life.

I tend to have difficulty remaining close to people. Others have even said that I am cold.

I tend to be judgmental and overly critical of people.

I have a general inability to see my own shortcomings.

I often fail to see that my words or actions hurt the feelings of others.

I think one or both of my parents drank too much alcohol.

I tend to be over-controlling of my mate, my children, or friends.

My parents abused me.

I have a hard time forgiving others when they hurt or frustrate me.

I often overreact to what others say or do to me.

I feel I'm motivated far too often by fear of failure.

I frequently think that I've been cheated out of important areas of life.

I get into fights with others that often result in physical aggression, such as throwing things, slapping, or hitting.

I don't really trust anyone other than myself.

Taking an honest look at our relationships is hard, but it is a very rewarding exercise. Of course, we all fail. But no failure is final. God is a God of infinite chances. And the fruit of a healed relationship is eternal. Remember Jesus' words to his disciples: "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

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# AN AFFAIR OF THE MIND

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Catalog No. 1089

Matthew 5:27-30

Eleventh Message

Gary Vanderet

March 2, 1997

Sex is one of the great mysteries in life that has to be explained.

Actually, in this context, there are two great mysteries: the mystery of our sexuality and the mystery of our spirituality. Neither of these can be discovered by science or by unaided reason; they must be revealed and explained to us.

The Bible says that sex is very, very good. Hugh Hefner and *Playboy* magazine did not invent sex. God did! The Book of Genesis is very clear about this. In the second chapter of the opening book of the Bible, we read that God created a garden and in it placed a man and a woman and gave them the privilege of uninhibited sexual freedom.

There are two remarkable statements in that chapter. The first is, "the two shall become one flesh." In 1 Corinthians 6, the apostle Paul makes it clear that that expression is an idiom for sexual intercourse. So sex is a gift of God. And second, Genesis says that the man and woman were "naked and not ashamed." They were unabashedly unashamed in their nakedness. The Bible makes a good case for fig leaves outside of marriage, but within marriage, God expects uninhibited sexual freedom. So God invented lovemaking, and he said that it is very good. There is nothing sinful or dirty about it.

But there is something very wrong with sex as we know it today. We say that sex is beautiful, because we know it should be that way, but sex has become ugly and dull. The relentless pursuit of one-night stands is one index of people's frustration. What a disclosure of our inability to achieve loving, lasting relationships. Rock groups, television shows, movies, and the media in general encourage us toward all kinds of activities that offer no satisfaction. "What's love got to do with it?" asks Tina Turner in one of her hit songs, totally disconnecting sex from relationships and love.

Someone has said that less than six per cent of the sexual acts portrayed in the media take place between husbands and wives. In the world of economics, Gresham's Law holds that bad money will push out good money. In some ways, this is true in our world in the area of sex. Ninety-four per cent of all sex in the media today takes place outside of marriage, which is the context where God planned for lovemaking.

J. Allen Peterson in his excellent book, *The Myth of the Greener Grass*, writes:

A call for fidelity is like a solitary voice crying in today's sexual wilderness. What was once labeled adultery and carried a stigma of guilt and embarrassment now is an affair—a nice-sounding, almost inviting word wrapped in mystery, fascination, and excitement. A relationship, not sin. What was once behind the scenes—a secret closely guarded—is now in the headlines, a TV theme, a best seller, as common as the cold.

As we continue in our series in the Sermon on the Mount, from chapter 5 of the gospel of Matthew, Jesus now turns from the sixth commandment to the seventh, from the prohibition against murder to the prohibition against adultery. Once again, the rabbis were attempting to limit the scope of the commandment, "You shall not commit adultery." Although the sin of desiring another man's wife is included in the tenth commandment (the prohibition against covetousness), the rabbis evidently found it more comforting to ignore this. In their view, provided they refrained from the act of adultery itself, they and their pupils were keeping the seventh commandment. They thus lived by a conveniently narrow definition of sexual sin and a conveniently broad definition of sexual purity.

But Jesus would have none of this. He extended the implications of the seventh commandment, revealing that the true meaning of God's command was much wider than a mere prohibition of acts of sexual immorality. Just as the prohibition of murder includes angry thoughts and insulting words, so the prohibition of adultery includes lustful looks and fanciful imagination. We can commit murder with our words, and we can commit adultery in our hearts or minds.

Just as the sixth commandment is given to protect our brother from our hostility, therefore, so the seventh commandment is designed to protect the love in our marriages. We find Jesus' words in Matthew 5:27-30:

**"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery'; but I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart. And if your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to go into hell. (NASB)**

Here, Jesus cites the seventh commandment, quoting Exodus 20:14. The issue is adultery, a violation of love for one's spouse. Jesus reinterprets this commandment, saying that the intent of that law needs to be fulfilled in the heart. His point is this: A man can be outwardly faithful—he may never have committed the act of adultery—yet inwardly he may be unfaithful; and that inward unfaithfulness erodes the love that he has for his wife. God wants husbands to love their wives with all their hearts. He is trying to spare us those attitudes that affect the love we have for our wives. If we permit sexual fantasies to persist in our minds (we can't help the attacks, of course), they will eventually erode away our love for our wives.

I have always interpreted these verses as merely saying that if we stop the thought, then we won't commit the act. Although that is true, the point that Jesus is making here is that the intent of the law is to teach us how to love. The extremely serious thing about sexual fantasies is that they have a negative effect on our love for our wives and get in the way of a full expression of that love for them. This is a grave matter. We may try to justify our fantasies, saying that we are not being unfaithful when we indulge them, but they really do affect our marriages. This is what turns active, caring husbands and fathers into passive, uncaring, uninvolved men.

Jesus says this is such a serious matter that it requires stern measures. We must discipline ourselves severely. What is particularly important to grasp is his equation of looking lustfully at a woman with committing adultery with her in our heart. It is the relationship between the eyes and the heart that leads Jesus, in the next two verses, to give practical instruction about how to maintain sexual purity.

His argument is as follows: If to look lustfully is to commit adultery in the heart, in other words, if heart-adultery is the result of eye-adultery (the eyes of the heart being stimulated by the eyes of the flesh), then the only way to deal with the problem is at its source—the eyes. We must chasten those members that evoke the fantasy in the first place. That is what Jesus means when he says, "If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out"; and, "If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off." Deal with those members that evoke the thoughts that lead to a lessening of your love for your wife, or your husband, as the case may be.

And what is it that evokes sexual fantasies? It is what we see and touch. Now it is important to point out that Jesus is not speaking literally here. You don't need to chop off your hand or pluck out your eye. He is speaking metaphorically. What he is advocating is not a literal, physical self-maiming, but a ruthless moral self-denial. Not mutilation, but mortification is the path of holiness, he declares. We need to guard what comes in through the eye: what we look at, what we read, what we watch on television, the movies we go to, etc. Paul

makes the same point in Romans 13, when he says, "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill its lusts." Do not do those things that make it easy for the flesh to fail.

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

I want to say a word about pornography at this point; and here I am addressing men more than women. Perhaps you think you don't know anyone who is involved in pornography, but I can say with certainty that you probably do. In fact, there are many men listening to me this morning whose struggle with this borders on addiction. Pornography is destroying many homes in this church. It is a thirteen billion dollar a year industry—more than the combined annual revenues of Coca-Cola and the McDonnell Douglas corporations. You no longer have to go to a back alley to get a pornographic magazine or video. Convenience is the name of the game; you can access it in seconds on your computer.

I have just finished reading a book by Laurie Hall called *An Affair of the Mind*. This is the book from which I drew my sermon title today. It is the story of one woman's courageous battle to save her family from the devastation wrought by pornography. In the book, she shares some letters she wrote but never mailed to her husband during their separation. I will read from one of them to show how devastating our addictions are to those whom we love:

Yesterday, Uncle George told me to dress up in my new clothes; he was going to take me out to lunch to meet some of his business associates. He thought I might get some helpful advice. "Networking is everything," he told me. My insides were in an uproar all the way into Boston...Just yesterday, I had been a wife and a mother, a home-school teacher and a childbirth educator. How I loved all those roles. Now I have to be something new—a businesswoman. It doesn't fit right.

"Her husband has a serious illness and he's not able to provide for his family right now, so Laurie is starting her own business," George explained to his associates over lunch. "Serious illness"—a nice euphemism for sexual addiction. After I got back from the lunch date, Ann called and asked me to stop by. I cried when she gave me a check to buy myself a new coat. I'm so ashamed that she could see how poorly I had been taking care of myself. I went to the coat outlet and bought a full-length purple wool coat—purple for the color of suffering.

Pornography is not a victimless crime. It erodes husbands' love for their wives.

Moral collapse is rarely a blow-out; it is more of a slow leak. It is the result of a thousand small indulgences, the consequences of which are never immediately apparent. Hardly anyone plans an adulterous affair; they transition into it. It begins with attraction. It's not so much lust as infatuation that brings us down. We find ourselves drawn to someone who is sensitive and understanding, who listens well and seems to care. We're seduced by that attraction and led on by subtle degrees. Soon, attraction becomes fantasy. We imagine ourselves with that person, and we feel good. Fictionalized affairs always seem right. That's their fundamental deception. Fantasies soften us, and our convictions erode. Then we're in a frame of mind to listen to our longings, and having listened, we have no will to resist. Next come the meetings, the sharing of inner conflicts, marital disappointments and other deep hurts. With that breach of confidence, the relationship begins to shift. Suddenly, two lonely people feel the need for one another's love. Then comes the inevitable yielding, and with it the need to justify the affair.

We are fools if we think we cannot fall. We are frail and unfinished. No matter how willing the spirit is, the flesh will always be weak. We're never *safe*. And we are in danger whether we're young or old, married or single, in the dumps or on a roll. We'll never be home free until we get home! Our safety doesn't lie in keeping ourselves safe, but in keeping ourselves in God's hands for safekeeping.

So what can we do?

My friend David Roper offers some helpful ideas in his excellent book, *A Burden Shared*. The following thoughts are from his chapter on sexual suicide.

To begin with, we can guard our relationship with God. The wise man says, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life" (Proverbs 4:23). There is a close relationship between human sexuality and human spirituality. As Charles Williams observed, "Sensuality and sanctity are so closely intertwined that our motives in some cases can hardly be separated until the tares are gathered out of the wheat by heavenly wit." In some inexplicable way, sexual passion is a small representation of our more profound spiritual passion for God, our "urge to merge" with him. He alone can gratify that desire. Devotion to Christ serves to satisfy our deepest longings and quell our other lusts. But when our love for Christ is on the wane we become restless for something more, and our resolve in every area begins to weaken.

We can guard our minds against romantic and sexual fantasies. Our predominant thoughts determine our inevitable actions: what we think in our hearts is what we will eventually, inevitably do.

"But," you ask, "how can we stop erotic thoughts?" As Martin Luther's mentor, Philip Melancthon, lamented, "Old Adam is much too strong for young Philip!" That is true. Our fantasies are much too strong to subor-

dinate. We should redirect them or displace them. When sexual fantasies intrude into our thoughts, we have two choices: We can reinforce them, in which case they become an obsession; or we can sidetrack them into devotion, meditation, and prayer.

We can cultivate affection for our spouses, daily rekindling the love and passion of our marriages and maintaining their romance. That is mutual protection. We're terribly vulnerable if we neglect our marriages, permitting them to grow dull and unfriendly.

We can watch for infatuations. Augustine confessed that he could not distinguish between the "clear shining of affection and the darkness of lust." Further, he admitted, "I could not keep myself within the kingdom of light where friendship binds soul to soul...And so I polluted the brook of friendship with the sewage of lust."

Are we attracted to someone other than our spouse? Do we look forward to being with them? Do we look for excuses to meet them? Do we dress a certain way when we know we will be in their company? Do we find ourselves wanting to reach out and touch them, hug them, or express affection for them in other tender ways? Do we imagine a romantic or sexual relationship with them? Are we defensive when our spouse expresses uneasiness about our relationship with them? These are early warning signs of a friendship turning into infatuation.

We must guard against intimacy with anyone other than our mates. The secrets of our hearts, our deepest hurts and longings, must be reserved for them alone.

We must be alert during periods of unusual pressure. Flaws become apparent in times of stress. We should be especially wary on days when we're emotionally and physically depleted, when we are lonely and isolated and longing for attention and affirmation.

We can rehearse the consequences of an affair. We gain insight through hindsight, as someone has said, but foresight is the less costly way. As Proverbs warns:

**For the lips of an adulteress drip honey,  
and her speech is smoother than oil;  
But in the end she is bitter as gall,  
Sharp as a double-edged sword.  
Her feet go down to death;  
Her steps lead straight to the grave.**

Adultery is suicide. The victim is your soul.

Paul Dunbar wrote :

This is the debt I pay,  
Just for one riotous day.  
Years of regret and grief,  
Sorrow without relief.

Slight was the thing I bought,  
Small was the debt I thought,  
Poor was the loan at best—  
God! but the interest!

We can publicize our home life, talk lovingly of our spouses, and surround ourselves with mementos and photographs of our marriages. This good for us and good for others.

We can find a friend on whom we can unload our darkest secrets, one who will not flinch when he hears the sordid stuff of our minds, who will hold a confidence, who will hold us accountable, who will ask us the tough questions—and then ask, “Did you lie?”

Every one of us can fall at any time. We may say, “There but for the grace of God, go I.” Better yet, we should say, “There but for the grace of God, I may yet go.”

Jesus tells us Matthew 26:41: “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.” When sexual lust begins to dance in your head, talk to the Lord who lives in you:

*Lord, I am tempted now. Don't let me forget your long-range dreams for my life. Don't let me trade them in for some short-term sexual thrill. Keep me safe, Lord, from the evil working on me this moment. Protect me. Make me strong. Guide me. I love you, Lord. I am yours. I want your will more than anything. I will not throw that away.*

It is possible that you think it is too late. Maybe your seams have been opened, and your evil deeds have been exposed. No, it is then that God reminds us of his cross, his forgiveness, his incomparable grace, and begins to make us new. God does not despise us when we fall. He discerns the possibilities, even in our defilement, unmakes our mistakes, and sets out to make us better than we've ever been before. He uses our sin to awaken our need for his grace. He softens us and makes us more susceptible to his shaping than we've ever been before. When we fall, we have fallen into his arms.

Rather than mourn our humiliation, we should confess it, dismiss it, and move on. Sin may have terrible consequences which we must live with for the rest of our natural lives, but sin repented of can only work for ultimate good. God takes the worst that we can do and makes it part of the good he has promised. He is the God of fools and failures, the God of another chance.

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# WHAT JESUS SAYS ABOUT DIVORCE

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Catalog No. 1090

Matthew 5:31-32

Twelfth Message

Gary Vanderet

March 9, 1997

In the Sermon on the Mount, the transition from Jesus' words on adultery to his teaching on divorce is a natural progression, for in certain circumstances, Jesus will say, remarriage by or to a divorced person is tantamount to adultery. This third antithesis is essentially a call to fidelity in marriage.

I approach this topic with the same reluctance that I had in our last study on adultery and infidelity. That is because, for one thing, divorce is a controversial and complex matter, and people have honest differences in their interpretation of Jesus' words. But my greatest hesitation comes from knowing that divorce touches people's emotions at a very deep level. No unhappiness is so intense as that felt in an unhappy marriage. No tragedy is so great as the degeneration of a relationship which God designed for love and fulfillment descending into one of bitterness, discord and despair.

Although I believe that God's way in most instances is not through divorce, I want to approach this study with sensitivity. Many couples are suffering greatly, and I have no wish to add to their distress. Yet it is because I am convinced that the teaching of Jesus on this and every subject is good—intrinsically good, good for individuals and good for society—that I take my courage and preach on.

We find our Lord's word on divorce in Matthew 5:31:

**"And it was said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of dismissal'; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." (Matt 5:31-32, NASB)**

These two verses can hardly be taken to represent the sum total of Jesus' instruction about divorce. They appear to be an abbreviated summary of his teaching, of which indeed Matthew records a fuller version, in chapter 19 of his gospel. We would be wise to take the two passages together, and to interpret the shorter in the light of the longer.

This is how Jesus' later debate with the Pharisees went. Matthew 19:3:

**And some Pharisees came to Him, testing Him, and saying, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?" And He answered and said, "Have you not read, that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this cause a man shall leave his father**

**and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh'? Consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." They \*said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?" He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery." (Matt 19:3-9)**

In Jesus' time, there were two conflicting views, held by the rival rabbinical schools of Hillel and Shammai, concerning divorce. The controversy centered on a phrase in Deuteronomy 24:1, which is the only passage in the Old Testament that talks about the grounds or procedure for a divorce.

Rabbi Shammai, who took a strict view, taught from Deuteronomy 24:1 that the sole ground for divorce was a grave matrimonial offense, something "indecent." Rabbi Hillel, on the other hand, held a very permissive view, which was the common attitude of the day. He interpreted the Mosaic provision to mean a man who "desires to be divorced from his wife for any cause whatsoever." Therefore, something that was unseemly or indecent was interpreted in the widest possible sense, even to include trivial things like burning the bagels. Rabbi Akiba went so far as to say that a man could divorce his wife if he found another woman who was more beautiful. The Pharisees seem to have been attracted by Rabbi Hillel's looseness, which may explain the form of their question: "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for *any cause*?" In other words, they wanted to know whose side Jesus was on in the contemporary debate.

I want to summarize in three statements Jesus' words on this matter, as his reply to the question raised by the Pharisees was given in three parts. It is revealing to consider these separately and in the order in which he spoke them. In each part he dissented from the Pharisees view.

*I. The Pharisees were absorbed with the grounds for divorce; Jesus with the institution of marriage.*

The Pharisees' question was framed so as to draw Jesus out on what he considered to be the legitimate grounds for divorce: For what cause might a man divorce his wife? For one cause, several causes or any cause?

Jesus does not answer their question. Instead, he asks a counter-question about their reading of Scripture. He refers them back to Genesis, to the creation of mankind as male and female (chapter 1), and to the institution of marriage (chapter 2), in which a man leaves his parents and cleaves to his wife and the two become one. This biblical definition implies that marriage is both exclusive ("a man...his wife"), and permanent ("cleave," or "be joined to his wife"). It is these two aspects of marriage which Jesus selects for emphasis in his comments that follow: first, "So they are no longer two but one flesh"; and second, "What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder."

Marriage, therefore, according to our Lord's exposition of its origins, is a divine institution which God makes permanent between two people who decisively and publicly leave their parents in order to form a new unit of society and then "become one flesh." Marriage affords the deepest possible intimacy in earthly relationships, deeper by far than the relationship with the children that come from our bodies. I remember the moment each of my three sons was born. A wonderful, mystical bond was forged between us the moment I held them in my arms, a bond that has certainly grown stronger over the years. And yet, I am not one flesh with them. I am one flesh only with my wife.

God's ideal for marriage is that it is a monogamous, intimate, enduring relationship.

*II. The Pharisees called Moses' provision for divorce a command; Jesus called it a concession to the hardness of human hearts.*

The Pharisees had grossly misinterpreted an Old Testament passage, which does not include a statement along the lines of Jesus' citation here: "Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce." This is actually a rabbinical misinterpretation of an OT passage.

It would be helpful to look at the passage itself, from Deuteronomy 24:1-4:

**"When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house, and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man's {wife,} and if the latter husband turns against her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her to be his wife, {then} her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the Lord and you shall not bring sin on the land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance.**

A careful reading of these verses makes it clear that God is not saying that a wife may be put away if she

displeases her husband. God, who knows the hearts of men, knows that there are some who would put their wives away for almost any cause. Furthermore, the term "some indecency" is ambiguous. No one knows precisely what Moses was referring to. But it doesn't matter. He was not saying there might be an occasion when your wife does something indecent and that is cause to put her away.

The whole paragraph hinges on a series of conditional clauses. The thrust of the passage is a prohibition on the remarriage of one's own divorced partner. This prohibition is the only command in the passage. Certainly there is no command to a husband to divorce his wife, nor is there any encouragement to do so. Moses is saying, using all these conditional clauses, "If a man puts his wife away for some cause, then he can't have her back."

The purpose of this law was to protect women from exploitation, because in those days, men treated women like junk. If a wife burned the bagels, she was out. A husband would give her a certificate of divorce, and that would satisfy the legal demands of divorce. The woman would go to another man, because in those days there was no place in society for a single woman. She would be married to someone else and he could possibly discard her. Moses is saying if that happens, her first husband could not have her back, because a woman should not be treated that way. That is the point. A wife was not to be treated like junk that is discarded. Even if it was done all legal-like, by granting her a bill of divorce, the man could not have her back. The Jews had completely misunderstood the point of the law.

Jesus responds to the Pharisees' question about the regulation of Moses, saying that Moses permitted them to divorce their wives because their hearts were hard. Moses permitted divorce, but he did not command it. It was not a divine instruction, but merely a divine concession to human weakness. But then Jesus immediately refers once again to the original purpose of God, saying, "But from the beginning it was not so." Thus, even the divine concession was, in principle, inconsistent with the divine institution.

*III. The Pharisees regarded divorce lightly; Jesus took it so seriously that, with only one exception, he called all remarriage after divorce adultery.*

Jesus assumes that a divorce would lead to the remarriage of the divorced parties. This explains the statement that a man divorcing his wife without cause "makes her an adulteress." The man's action could have that result only if she married again. A separation without a divorce, in legal terms, is a modern arrangement that was unknown in the ancient world.

Since God instituted marriage as an exclusive and permanent union which he makes and man must not break, Jesus draws the inevitable deduction that to divorce one's partner and marry another, or to marry a di-

vorced person, is to enter a forbidden, adulterous relationship; for the person who may have secured a divorce in the eyes of human law is still, in the eyes of God, married to his or her first partner.

Only one exception is made to this principle: “except for the cause of unchastity or except for immorality.”

Some reject the authenticity of the exception clause, because it is absent from the parallel passages in the Gospels of Mark and Luke. But its absence from their accounts is due not to their ignorance of it, but to their acceptance of it as something that was taken for granted. After all, under the Mosaic law, adultery was punishable by death (although the death penalty for this offense seems to have fallen into disuse by the time of Jesus), so nobody would have questioned that marital unfaithfulness was just grounds for divorce. Even the rival Rabbis Shammai and Hillel were agreed on this. Their dispute concerned how much more widely than this the expression “some indecency,” from Deuteronomy 24:1, should be interpreted.

The Greek word for unchastity is *porneia*, from which we get our word pornography. It is a comprehensive word which refers to some act of physical sexual immorality. When it is used of a married person, it refers to any illicit sexual intercourse, which may include adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, etc. Here Jesus is saying that the only situation in which divorce and remarriage are possible, without breaking the seventh commandment, is when it has already been broken by some serious sexual sin. (I believe there is a second situation, willful desertion, which is referred to by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7.)

The Pharisees’ attitude was that if a man divorced his wife, it was important to divide the inheritance equally, that the alimony and child support, etc., be agreed to. But Jesus would not have a man treat his wife in this way. He would say that she is your wife until death separates you. So stick with her like glue, even if she is not particularly easy to live with, even if she is not exactly what you thought she was when you married her. The only thing that breaks that relationship is if she walks out and forms a relationship with another man.” Jesus is not talking only about adultery. The wife may be adulterous and still she can be taken back. But if she determines in her heart that she is going to live with another man, and she commits adultery, then that breaks the marriage. Unless that happens, for better or worse, stick to her like glue and love her, like God loves Israel.

The Jews were saying, “As long as she is provided for financially, then it is OK.” Jesus disagreed. God hates divorce, because it destroys people. Now it doesn’t say that God hates divorcees. That is an important distinction. But he hates divorce, because it is so destructive. So don’t divorce your wife. Love her! You may have to start loving her like your enemy, but start loving her. Then, in time, you can love her like your friend; and finally, you can love her like your wife. You can learn

how to love!

When we were in Ireland some years ago, we had tea one afternoon with a group of very proper elderly ladies. Somehow the topic of divorce came up. I could tell that my thoughts on the matter were not being well received. One of the ladies asked, incredulously, “How can you say that you can learn to love? Love is a feeling!”

If we can’t learn to love we’re in big trouble. Learning to love: this is the supreme lesson of life. That is why we are here on earth—to learn how to love. And the primary tool to teach us how to do this is the person whom God has placed in our life—for the rest of our life. This is how we learn just how selfish we are.

We can learn to love! That is the message of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. In doing so we will fulfill the intent of the law. These laws that seem to be so harsh are intended to teach us how to love people. That is the point of it all.

We must take our guidelines not from the world, but from the Word of God. And we must take our love to an extent that the world does not know. We must love more than the world.

Here is the world operates in this area, taken from the book, *Divorce: How And When To Let Go*:

Your marriage can wear out. People change their values and lifestyles. People want to experience new things. Change is a part of life. Change and personal growth are traits for you to be proud of, indicative of a vital, searching mind. You must accept the reality that in today’s multifaceted world it is especially easy for two persons to grow apart. Letting go of your marriage—if it is no longer fulfilling—can be the most successful thing you have ever done. Getting a divorce can be a positive, problem-solving, growth-oriented step. It can be a personal triumph.

This is the philosophy of the world.

It is the love of Christ, not self effort, that gives us the power to love on another level. It comes from depending on him. And when we do that we will have the love that we need to fulfill the intent of the law.

One marriage counselor told me that in his opinion, the average husband or wife on the verge of a divorce has trouble in only about fifteen to twenty per cent of their marriage. Think through the implications of that. It is saying that, generally speaking, eighty to eighty-five per cent of the marriage is fine, so they are contemplating throwing all that away because they are having trouble with fifteen to twenty per cent. How foolish and shortsighted is this approach.

I want to end by challenging you to be an agent of change in this church.

Let me give you a couple of suggestions.

We have a great need to teach our young people

about love.

Most young people growing up today do not know the difference between love and lust, between love and infatuation. So they marry a body. When you do that, of course, every year that goes by puts you further out of business! What you marry is a person, not a body. Bodies deteriorate; persons develop. And that takes time. Young people need to learn that they are not going to get instant love the way they get instant sound on the television.

They also need to understand what marriage is all about. Isn't it interesting that in many churches, all you need to do to get married is to show up. In marriage, the most important of all human relationships, we spend more time and effort on the ceremony than on the marriage.

We have a great need for models.

Those of you who have been married for twenty, thirty, forty or fifty years need to share with young people so they can see that there are some couples who by the grace of God have held their marriages together. I had lunch with Bruce Beebe last week, and he told me that he and Sally have a heart for meeting with younger couples. Currently they are leading two separate groups of newly married couples. He asked me if I knew of other couples who have been married a long time who have the same heart and could share this important ministry.

We also need models of people who have been through divorce and have learned the grace of God through their experience. We must avoid the danger of becoming insensitive to the needs of divorced people. Some pastors know exactly what they believe about divorce, but they haven't got a clue as to what to do with divorced people. Very rarely will someone ask me the question, "Do I have a legitimate reason for divorce?" Most of the time they just get a divorce. Later, of course, they end up asking for help. That is the reality of today's world.

Divorce is devastating. Many of you listening to me who have been divorced could give testimonies that would drive this truth down our throats. The pain of divorce is excruciating, and not only for the couple, but for their children. Let us commit to doing everything in our power to restore relationships in our homes. That is what we need more than anything else. We are an affluent people, but we are dying inside. We have beautiful homes and luxury cars, but we are beset with divorce, disintegration, pain and hurt. The challenge before us is to make our homes refuges of light and love, healing and grace. This is what the world needs to see.

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# KEEPING YOUR WORD

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Catalog No. 1091

Matthew 5:33-37

13th Message

Gary Vanderet

March 16th, 1997

Soren Kierkegaard tells a tale about a make-believe country where only ducks live. One Sunday morning, all the ducks came into church, waddled down the aisle and into their pews, and squatted. Then the duck minister took his place behind the pulpit, opened the duck bible and read, "Ducks! You have wings, and with wings you can fly like eagles. You can soar into the sky! Use your wings!" The ducks yelled, "Amen!" And they waddled home.

That humorous little story is a reminder of the purpose of studying the Bible. It is not to make us smart. Learning is not the goal, nor is gathering information. The goal of Bible study is transformation. The truth is given to make us more like Christ: to make us more loving. Sometimes non-Christians have a better grasp of this than Christians. They don't point out our wrong theology (they don't understand much of anything about theology), but it is disappointing to them when Christians lie, don't pay their bills, cheat on their taxes, fail to keep their word, freeload shamelessly, and desert their mates. Non-Christians know, sometimes better than Christians, that we bear the image of Christ, so we ought to act as Christ acted.

We return to our study in the Sermon on the Mount, the best explanation and the clearest illustration of what true Christianity is all about. In this discourse, Jesus explained the true meaning and intent of the Old Testament law, which the Pharisees had distorted. The verses we will look at this morning speak to the issue of honesty in our speech.

In this context, I am reminded of a story I heard recently. Four high school students were late to school one day. They entered at the end of first period, and solemnly told the teacher they were late because the car had a flat tire. The sympathetic teacher smiled and told them it was too bad that they were late, because they had missed a test earlier that morning. She said she was willing to let them make it up on one condition. She gave each one of them a pencil and paper, sent them to the four corners of the room, and asked them to answer one question: Which tire was flat?

Just as the rabbis tended to be permissive in their attitude toward divorce, they were permissive also in their teaching about oaths. This is another example of their devious treatment of Old Testament Scripture: they wanted to make it easier to obey. As we have done in earlier studies, we will look first at the Mosaic law; next, at how the Pharisees had distorted it; and finally, at the

true implication of the law on which Jesus insisted.

We find his words in Matthew 5:33:

**"Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.' (Matt 5:33, NASB)**

Although this is not an accurate quotation of any one law of Moses, it is a summary of several Old Testament precepts which require people who make vows to keep them. And the vows in question are, strictly speaking, oaths in which the speaker calls upon God to witness his vow and to punish him if he breaks it.

Moses frequently emphasized the evil of false swearing and the duty of keeping oaths. Here are a few examples:

"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain" (Exod 20:7, the third commandment).

"You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God" (Lev 19:12).

"When a man vows a vow to the Lord,...he shall not break his word" (Num 30:2).

"When you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not be slack to pay it" (Deut 23:21).

The intent behind these commandments is quite clear: They prohibit false swearing or perjury, that is, making a vow and then breaking it.

But the Pharisees got to work on these awkward prohibitions and tried to restrict them. They shifted attention away from the vow itself and the need to keep it, to the formula used in making it. They argued that what the law prohibited was not taking the name of the Lord *in vain*, but taking *the name of the Lord* in vain. False swearing, they concluded, meant profanity, not perjury. So they developed elaborate rules for the taking of vows. They listed which formulas were permissible, and they added that only those formulas which included the divine name made the vow binding. One need not be so particular, they maintained, about keeping vows in which the divine name had not been used.

Jesus expressed his contempt for this kind of deceptive reasoning later in his ministry, as we see in Matthew 23:16-22:

**"Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' You blind fools! Which is greater: the**

gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.' You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it. (Matt 23:16-22, NIV)

Jesus' teaching here in the Sermon on the Mount is similar.

The second part of his antithesis, in which he set his teaching over against that of the rabbis, reads as follows. Verse 34:

**"But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; and anything beyond these is of evil. (Matt 5:34-37, NASB)**

Jesus begins by arguing that the question of the formula used in making vows is totally irrelevant, and in particular that the Pharisees' distinction between formulas which mention God and those which do not is entirely artificial. However hard you try, Jesus said, you cannot avoid some reference to God, for the whole world is God's and you cannot eliminate him from any of it. If you vow by "heaven," it is God's throne; if by "earth," it is his footstool; if by "Jerusalem," it is his city. If you swear by your head, it is yours in the sense that it is nobody else's, and yet it is God's creation and under his control. You cannot even change the natural color of a single hair which is black when you are young and white in old age.

So if the precise wording of a vow-formula is irrelevant, then a preoccupation with formulas is not the point of the law at all. Since anybody who makes a vow must keep it, strictly speaking, all formulas are superfluous. For the formula does not add to the seriousness of the vow. A vow is binding irrespective of its accompanying formula.

That being so, the real implication of the law is that we must keep our promises and be people of our word; then vows become unnecessary. *"Make no oath at all but rather let your statement be, 'Yes, or 'No.'"* As the apostle James would put it later: "Let your yes be yes and your no be no." And, Jesus adds, *"anything beyond these is of evil."* It is either from the evil of our hearts and its fundamental deceit, or from the evil one, whom Jesus described as "a liar and the father of lies."

Christians should say what they mean and mean what they say. It is an issue of integrity, which can be defined as doing what you said you would do.

- You promised that you would be faithful to your mate.
- You declared your expenses amounted to a certain figure.
- You promised your son you would play ball with him.
- You assured your roommate you would carry out your end of the load.
- You signed a contract that committed you to certain things.
- You told your neighbor you would bring back the tool you borrowed.
- You swore to tell the truth when you took the stand.
- You told someone you would pay back the money you borrowed.
- You said that you would pray, or return a phone call, or pay your bill, or show up at 6:30.

If divorce is due to human hardheartedness, swearing is due to human untruthfulness.

We might ask at this point, If swearing is forbidden, why did God himself use oaths in Scripture? Remember, he said to Abraham: "By myself I have sworn . . . I will indeed bless you . . ."? The answer is that the purpose of divine oaths was not to increase God's credibility, but to elicit and confirm our faith. The fault which made God condescend to this human level is not due to any untrustworthiness on his part, but to our unbelief.

Jesus is emphasizing that honest men do not need to resort to oaths. It is not that we should refuse to take an oath if it is required of us; it is that that external authority is not needed. Oath-taking is a pathetic confession of man's dishonesty. That is why we resort to oaths.

Secondly, if swearing is forbidden, should Christians, in order to be consistent in their obedience, decline to swear an affidavit for any purpose and to give evidence on oath in a court of law? The Anabaptists took this line in the sixteenth century; and most Quakers still do today. While admiring their desire not to compromise, one can still perhaps question whether their interpretation is not excessively literalistic. What Jesus emphasized in his teaching was that honest men do not need to resort to oaths; it was not that they should refuse to take an oath if required to do so by some external authority.

Swearing (i.e. oath-taking) is really a pathetic confession of our own dishonesty. Why do we find it necessary to introduce our promises by some exaggerated formula like, "I swear by the Holy Bible"? It is because we know that our simple, unadorned word is not likely to be trusted. So we try to induce people to believe us by adding a solemn oath. As A. M. Hunter put it, "Oaths arise because men are so often liars." The same is true of all forms of exaggeration, hyperbole and the



use of superlatives. We are not content to say we had an enjoyable time; we have to describe it as “fantastic,” “fabulous,” “unbelievable” or some other linguistic invention. But the more we resort to such expressions the more we devalue human language and human promises.

The issue here is truthfulness. You might want to underline the words in verse 37: “*Let your statement be, ‘Yes,’ or ‘No.’*” In the Old Testament, oaths and vows were meant to be kept. These verses are not a prohibition against oaths. God took an oath; and men of God did. But Jesus is saying, “Among my people, oaths are not necessary.” Your word is true—because Christians have the truth. Christians are related to “the Truth.” They are to speak the truth, in love.

How much we need people with integrity, the kind of people who, when they say, Yes, that’s it, you can take it to the bank; and when they say, No, they are not stuttering.

As we prepare our hearts for taking communion this morning, let us take a few moments and gaze upon the beauty of our Lord. Certainly, no more truthful man ever lived. He was one who called himself “the truth.” John said he was “full of grace and truth.” Everything he did was truthful, and yet he was unfailingly gracious. There is a kind of truth that isn’t gracious at all. It may be the opposite of falsehood, but it is also far from goodness and beauty. It was truth linked with grace that made Jesus the man he was.

I think of that last night before he was crucified, when he and the disciples celebrated that final Passover together, and he instituted the Lord’s Supper. There was an argument over who was the greatest. Who could have blamed Jesus if he had blasted them? But he didn’t. Instead, he girded himself with a towel and washed their feet. He who was the greatest of all became the servant of all. What truth and beauty!

And then there was the leper whom Jesus encountered when he was teaching in one of the little villages of Galilee. Luke says the man was “full of leprosy”—a medical expression for an advanced case of the disease. He was all lesions, running sores and grotesque stumps, discolored and disfigured, shocking in his ugliness, a gross caricature of what a man was intended to be. Jesus, moved with compassion, reached out and hugged him. He didn’t have to touch him. He could have cured him with a word from afar. Yet there was every need in the world to hug this ugly, awful man, because no one else had done so. What truth and beauty!

There was that day when Jesus was teaching in the temple and he was interrupted by shouts and sounds of scuffling. A group of clergymen barged in and uncere-

moniously dumped a crumpled and disheveled woman at his feet. They tried to trick Jesus into breaking the law of Moses. They cried, “Moses commanded that we should stone such a woman. What do you say?” Controlling his anger at their hypocrisy, Jesus uttered the words that have been heard down through the centuries, “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.” As they all slowly departed, he looked into that woman’s eyes and said to her, “I don’t condemn you. Go and sin no more.” What truth and beauty!

I think of all the dirty little street urchins of that day who used to tag along behind Jesus and climb into his lap. His disciples wanted to shoo them away, but Jesus gathered them into his arms and blessed them. What truth and beauty!

There was a beauty in Jesus’ truthfulness. It was more than being decent and ethical and right, he *did* things beautifully. It was not just what he said, but how he carried out his own words.

The rules and regulations of the Pharisees could do nothing to change their hearts. So don’t leave here today vowing to be more honest, to handle your money better or spend more time with your children. Most of the time that’s the reaction of the flesh—vowing to be more religious. It won’t last, of course.

What we need to do more of is following the Lord Jesus. Let him put his finger on the things that need to be changed in your life. When he begins to change us, then we are changed indeed. Oh, there will be failures along the way, but that will not take away from the reality that you have been changed utterly. No longer are you what you once were. There will be a different quality about your life that bespeaks God’s goodness and his power to change us. Then when we fail, we can admit to it, because there will be no need for a facade of righteousness. Because we have Christ, we have the real thing.

This is what we celebrate when we come to this table: the life of One who kept his word. He died for *all* sin: the obvious sins of murder and adultery, as well as the secret sins of selfishness and pride. He *himself* bore our sins in his body on the cross. That was sin’s final cure. Some people look at the cross and say that man was so bad and God was so mad that someone had to pay. But it was not anger that moved our Lord to be crucified; it was love. The crucifixion is the point of the story: God loves us so much that he *himself* took on our guilt; he internalized all our sin and healed it. That is why, when it was over, he could say, “It is finished!” There is nothing left for us to do but enter into forgiving acceptance.

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# A LOVE THAT OVERCOMES

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Catalog No. 1092

Matthew 5:38-42

14th Message

Gary Vanderet

April 6th, 1997

The words of Jesus in our studies in the Sermon on the Mount are helping us understand the true intent of the Law. In his discourse, Jesus corrected the false interpretation of the Pharisees with regard to the law. He said that the purpose of the Old Testament is to produce in us a love for other people. That was, is, and always will be the mark of citizens of the kingdom.

If we don't love people, then we don't understand the Scriptures. The point of Bible study is not to get our theology correct, although that is important, nor is it to make us smarter or enable us to discover what is going to happen next. The purpose of all Bible study is to know God and to become conformed to the image of his Son.

The final two antitheses in Jesus' remarks, to which we come now from chapter 5 of Matthew's gospel, mark the apex of the Sermon on the Mount. The verses which we will look at today and next Sunday are the most admired, and also, alas, the most resented in the sermon. Jesus' words speak of an attitude of total love, a love that overcomes evil with good. Here is the greatest challenge facing Christians. Nowhere is the distinctiveness of our Christian counter-culture more clearly seen than in this area.

While I long for these truths to be a part of my life, they are at times more longed for than real. I grew up in a home where fighting was the norm. I am a survivor of this kind of background. It was my wife who finally got my attention one day when she said to me, "You love to fight! You are not content without conflict." So we approach with great humility the words of Jesus.

Chapter 5, verse 38:

**"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone wants to sue you, and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. And whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you. (Matt 5:38-42, NASB)**

These words from the oral teaching of the rabbis come right from the Mosaic law. As we have already seen, the law has a civil as well as a moral code. Exodus 20 lists the commandments, and chapters 21-23 of that book set out a series of statutes designed to teach the young nation how to apply the Ten Commandments. In

the middle of many different examples given with particular emphasis on damage to persons or property we read these words:

**"If men are fighting...and there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise" (Exod 21:22-25).**

It is clear from the context that this instruction was addressed to the judges of Israel. In fact, the judges are mentioned in Deuteronomy 19:17-18. This is the principle of exact retribution, and it had a two-fold purpose. It laid the foundation of justice, identifying the correct punishment that is deserved for a crime, compensating the victim to an exact equivalent and no more. And it prevented revenge. It prohibited someone from taking the law into his own hands, forming a vigilante committee or starting a family feud.

In Jesus' day it is likely that the literal retaliation for damages had been replaced in Jewish legal practices by a financial payment. The problem lay in the fact that the Scribes and Pharisees extended this principle of just retribution from the law courts, where it belonged, to the realm of personal relationships, where it did not belong. Essentially they were justifying personal revenge, even though that was forbidden in the law, as Leviticus 19 states: "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of *your people*, but *love your neighbor as yourself*. I am the Lord." So this principle of just retribution was being used as an excuse for personal revenge—the very thing it was designed to prevent.

Notice that Jesus doesn't necessarily contradict the principle of retribution. In fact, in many places his teaching on the reality of a divine judgment on the last day affirms that principle. What he clearly says is that although this principle may pertain to the judgment of God, and to a court of law, it is not appropriate in the realm of personal relationships. Personal relationships are always based on love, not justice. So our response to individuals who wrong us should not be to retaliate, but to accept injustice.

Jesus words are very powerful: "*do not resist him who is evil.*" What does that mean? The verb "to resist" is very clear. It means "to oppose, to withstand or set yourself against someone or something." So who or what is it that we are forbidden to resist? There are certain things that Scripture, using this same verb, makes it clear we are not to resist. We are not to resist God, his

will, his authority or his instruction. But we are commanded to resist the devil, the “evil one.” So Jesus certainly isn’t saying to compromise with Satan or with sin. What we are forbidden not to resist isn’t evil, or the “evil one,” but an evil person. Notice that Jesus doesn’t deny that the devil is evil. Our Lord is not asking us to pretend that the devil is not bad, or to condone his behavior, but what he will not allow us to do is retaliate. The Good News Bible translates this, “Do not take revenge on someone who wrongs you.”

Jesus goes on to give four illustrations that set out how to apply this principle of non-retaliation. In each case there is someone who in a sense is evil in that they are seeking to hurt us. The first hits us in the face; the second sues us; the third seizes our service, and the fourth begs money from us. Verse 39:

**“But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone wants to sue you, and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. And whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you. (5:39-42)**

All of these, except the third, have a very contemporary ring to them. The verb “forces,” in verse 41, was used with reference to the compulsory transportation of military baggage. The lesson can be applied today to any kind of service where we find ourselves selected rather than volunteering.

In each of the four cases, Jesus says our responsibility is to withhold seeking revenge to the extent that we allow the evil person in question to double the injury. Notice that striking someone on the right cheek when one is right-handed means the perpetrator strikes with the back of his hand. In the Eastern world even today this is an insulting blow; it is a slap of insult and shame. This of course is what Jesus himself submitted to. It was written of him in the OT, “I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.”

And that is exactly what happened. The soldiers spat upon him; they blindfolded him and struck him with their fists; and the guards beat him. They put a purple robe on him and twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spat on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him, mocking him.

And our Savior responded with the utmost dignity, self control and love. He refused to retaliate, and allowed his persecutors to complete their mockery. One church Father, Justin Martyr, said, “Jesus’ greatest miracle is that he did not retaliate.” When he was stretched out on the cross, instead of bitter resentment against his executioners he offered up his life to God and waited for his vindication. That was the secret of his compo-

sure.

And Jesus calls his followers to share in his crucifixion. Peter put it this way: “Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly” (1 Pet 2:21-23). Such non-resistance is not a sign of weakness. Rather, it is a sign of the strength and power of one who has such control of himself and so much love for others that he resists any form of retaliation.

We need to add at this point that although there will be times when we will have to apply these commands literally, we must be careful in our interpretation. These are not detailed regulations, but simply examples of a principle: the principle of love, the selfless love of someone who when he is hurt, refuses to retaliate in any form, but instead responds by seeking the highest good of the person who has hurt him. He doesn’t strike back, he doesn’t return evil for evil, because he is free from personal resentment. His desire is to return good for evil. And so he is willing to give—his body, his clothing, his time, his money—whatever love requires.

So the only limit is the limit that love itself imposes. And there are limits. Some would use this verse to keep a wife in a physically abusive situation but, according to this passage, such action would certainly not be for the highest good of that woman. There is a limit, and that limit is what love requires.

There was an occasion when the apostle Paul “resisted” (the same word) Peter to his face. Peter was acting wrongly, because he had stopped fellowshiping with Gentile brothers. Paul didn’t give in to him and let him continue to act that way; he confronted him publicly. He wasn’t bitter toward Peter. He didn’t insult him or berate him. He spoke the truth in love, standing up for the Gentile Christians whom Peter had offended.

The principle here is given to prevent revenge and retaliation, not to encourage others to take advantage of us. True love always acts to stop evil and promote good. So authentic Christian non-resistance means non-retaliation. Rudolph Stier put it this way, “This must be your retaliation—love and truth for hatred and lies.”

Unfortunately these words have been misinterpreted by some as the basis for pacifism, the refusal to use force in every situation. If that was true, then we would have to say that the apostles misunderstood Jesus, for the NT teaches that the State is a divine institution commissioned to punish wrong and reward good. I do not want to stray from the truth of these verses into a philosophical debate on a Biblical view of war. The point I am making is that the duties of the State are different from those of an individual.

The response we are to make is laid down by the apostle Paul in Romans chapter 12:

**Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect**

**what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord. But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head." Do not overcome evil by evil, but overcome evil with good.** (Rom 12:17-21)

We are commanded not to seek vengeance, not because vengeance is wrong, but because it is the prerogative of God; he will repay.

So the first thing we must do when we are hurt by someone is turn to God and acknowledge that he is there, that he allowed the hurt and that he will use it for good, evil as it may be. Even when the action is cruel it will do us good, because we must learn to endure hatred. Our Lord was nailed to the cross. You can count on it that you will be nailed to the wall!

God gives us over to such hurt because that is part of the process that will make us what he intends us to be. The hurting makes us sweeter and mellower. In time we lose the fear of losing. We learn to let go of what we want. We're not so easily provoked to wrath by harm or reproof. We learn to absorb abuse without retaliation, to accept reproof without defensiveness, to return a kind answer to wrath.

God is producing in us the wonderful quality of meekness. As we learned when we studied the beatitudes, meekness is not weakness, but rather, strength under control. It is a refusal to defend ourselves or to retaliate for wrong; to be humble, non-defensive and unassuming in the face of brutal and heartless attack. We experience a wonderful sense of the Father's approval and affection when we lay down our lives in this way. Jesus said, "My Father loves me because I lay down my life" (John 10:17).

Because God is there and he will repay, we can trust him to deal with the person who has hurt us.

We ought to do what we can to deliver someone who is being oppressed, of course. That is our responsibility out of Christian compassion. But we don't need to take the final responsibility to remove ourselves out of the hands of evildoers. We must do what we can. We don't need to permit ourselves to be unnecessarily abused or misused by others. We can speak up and say it is not right to treat human beings that way. But when all is said and done we have to trust God to work out the final result. When we do that we don't need to worry. We can put our oppressor in God's hands and leave the outcome with him.

Of course, that is an unnatural response! Our natural tendency is to set things right ourselves, to get the person who did us wrong and make him pay for it. This happens all the time in homes and marriages. One spouse wrongs another, and sometimes the wrong is

grievous, so the wronged partner resolves to get even. He or she withdraws conjugal rights, or acts coldly in other ways in an attempt to even things up. But it is far better to say, "What you are doing is wrong, and you are answerable to God. But I am answerable to God, too, and I will do what is right, no matter what it costs me."

That is what David means in Psalm 37 when he says, "*Trust in the Lord and do good.*" He reinforces his point later when he says, "Do not fret, it only leads to evildoing." When we get angry we are inclined to wrong people. But when we put them in God's hands, and let him deal with them in his time and in his way, then we are free to be generous. We can be courteous, gentle and loving, because we know that God will deal with everything in his time.

There is nothing harder on our psyches than trying to redress all the wrongs in our lives, seeking to set things right. It is far better to put evildoers in God's hands and go on about the business of what he has called us to do.

David says later in Psalm 37, "Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him." Compose your soul. Settle your heart and wait. That is hard, isn't it? We want swift answers to our needs. But God is always working on a grander scale than that. He has purposes in mind that we cannot envision. He is shaping us and making us into the people he intends us to be throughout eternity—and present unpleasantness and long-term injustice are ways he uses to accomplish that end. Even our Lord, though he was the Son, learned obedience through the things which he suffered.

So David says, trust the Lord. Put that person who is working his mischief on you in God's hands and let him deal with him. Do whatever God calls you to do, and he will give you the grace to obey. Delight yourself in the Lord and don't obsess about what is wrong. If you are going to be compulsive about anything, give yourself to worship and adoration of Christ. Your name may be beclouded right now, your reputation ruined, but one day, God will pick you out of a crowd and say, "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." We may not be vindicated until we stand before him, but he will set things right.

On this point David Roper writes: "This is the majesty of meekness: To bear patiently the spiteful attacks of malice and envy; to overcome evil with good; to live in the midst of difficult people and love them, to keep our mouths closed and our hearts open when we're in the presence of our critics; to be unruffled and composed through a storm of unkindness and misrepresentation."

Abraham Lincoln said, "The best way to overcome an enemy is to make him your friend."

We are reminded in this passage and throughout Scripture that the way we express love in the world is by not reacting in vengeance when we are mistreated. Can you imagine what would happen on this Peninsula

if Christians would begin to act this way? I wonder how many times we turn people away from Christianity by assuming the same attitude as the world around us. Surely this is the practical advice that Paul is suggesting when he reminds us that we are not to be “conformed to this age.”

So don't try to get even. That is God's domain. When we react that way, we are usurping his job. But we lack his power and wisdom, and the result is that we will make things worse. All we have to do is look around us to see how true this is. Vengeance only perpetuates evil, expands it and flings it out wider so that it touches more lives and hurts more hearts. The only One who has the wisdom and the power to do this rightly is God himself. Therefore, he says, “You leave vengeance to me. I will take care of the individual who has injured you. You must never try to handle this yourself.”

There is an old Quaker saying, “If we fight the beast by becoming a beast, then bestiality has won.” When we have done all we can do the only thing left is to wait patiently until God avenges the wrong and vindicates us. He will refute our critics in his own time and in his own way—in this life or in the next. God is the Alpha and the Omega. He and not our accusers will have the last word. It may be that our enemies will find out then that we are not so much to blame as they thought.

We must never nourish thoughts of hatred or retaliation. We should rather think of the misery of our enemies' hearts—full as they are of jealousy, envy and bitterness. We must pity them and pray for them. Consider Judas. Though our Lord knew from the beginning who would betray him, not one of his disciples knew (John 13:22). Nothing in Jesus' behavior betrayed the betrayer.

Jesus prayed from the cross, “Father forgive them”—not when the crucifixion was over and men were sorry for what they did, but in the very moment when it was being carried out. So it must be with us. “To see that my adversary gives me my rights is natural,” Oswald Chambers wrote, “but from our Lord's standpoint it does not matter if I am defrauded or not; what does matter is that I do not defraud.”

Is there someone in your life today who is causing you great pain? Jesus wants you to give that pain to him. Your natural response is to retaliate, but God can give you love for that person. Put him or her in God's hands, and let God fill you with his love.

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I am indebted to John R.W. Stott for his excellent book, *The Sermon On The Mount*. I have borrowed extensively from his lecture series.



# BEYOND FORGIVENESS

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Catalog No. 1093

Matthew 5:43-48

15th Message

Gary Vanderet

April 13th, 1997

I became a Christian during my sophomore year at Long Beach State University. I had already read most of the New Testament before I asked Christ to come into my life. I sensed that this decision was going to radically alter not only my destiny and character, but my vocational plans as well. I was right. In the next school year I transferred to a small Bible college a few miles away, from a school with an enrollment of 30,000 students to one with only 250. But the greatest shock to me was the number of rules this new school had and how many in this new community defined what constituted righteousness. It seemed everyone had their list of what Christians should not do, whether it was the "dirty dozen" or the "nasty nine."

One Saturday I was in the library studying, which I thought was pretty noble, at least for me. The librarian approached me with a scowl on his face and told me I would have to leave. When I asked him why, he said, "You know why!" When I assured him I didn't, he told me that shorts were not allowed in the library. What a rude awakening to a newly converted young man! Soon I would discover that there were whole lists of activities that were considered worldly in that community. I am sure there are good reasons, from both the Christian and the non-Christian perspective, to not participate in many of the activities that were taboo, but if we define worldliness by a finite list of activities that we should shun, we are in danger of losing sight of what worldliness really is.

The Bible defines worldliness as an attitude of independence from God. "Who needs God?" the world asks. The world is a community of flesh-governed individuals (the flesh can be defined as our basic humanity, who we are apart from God). When we operate on that basis, we are being worldly. We may be doing good things, even activities like teaching Sunday School, for instance, and still be worldly if we are living independent of God.

This was how the Pharisees of Jesus' day operated. These teachers of the law insisted on defining righteousness in narrow, external ways. They had reduced and categorized God's law, narrowing its definitions and extending its permissions so that they could keep it. But in Jesus' remarks in the Sermon on the Mount he showed the Pharisees the true intent of the law, pointing out that its real purpose was to deal with their hearts, their stubborn independence from God and from their fellow men.

This is why Jesus began his discourse by describing what love looks like. Our basic problem is that we don't like people. But God wants to change that and produce in us a longing for reconciliation with him and our fellow men. As we have seen, we do not have the ability within ourselves to do this; it comes from God himself.

We come now to the highest point of this calling from God, set out in the words of Jesus from Matthew's gospel. Chapter 5, verse 43:

**"You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR, and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on {the} evil and {the} good, and sends rain on {the} righteous and {the} unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matt 5:43-48, NASB)**

Once again, the Pharisees had blatantly perverted the law. The phrase, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR, and hate your enemy," is taken from Leviticus 19. Unfortunately, in the older editions of the New American Standard version of the Bible this entire phrase is rendered in capitals letters, indicating that it is a quotation from the Old Testament. But the second half of that quotation is not only missing from the text, it is a blatant misinterpretation of it. Moses said in Lev. 19:18, "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord."

The Pharisees had missed the mark in two ways: they had left out certain things and added others to the commandment. They deliberately restricted both the standard of love, leaving out the words "as yourself" (a pretty high standard), and the recipients of that love, defining who their neighbor was by excluding their enemies and adding the command to hate them instead.

It is amazing that the rabbis would have argued for their interpretation. They would have said that Leviticus 19 was written to the people of Israel, giving instructions to them concerning their responsibilities to their own parents, and more widely, their brothers and neighbors. They would quote the verses in that same



chapter which read, "Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly"; "Do not go about spreading slander among your people"; "Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life. I am the Lord"; "Do not hate your brother in your heart," and they would argue that their "neighbor" was a Jew, a fellow Israelite, one who belonged to their race and religion. They held that the law said nothing about strangers or enemies. Thus, since the law commanded them to love their neighbor, they held that it implied they should hate their enemy. And they hated Gentiles with a passion. They called them dogs. They would have nothing to do with them. They wouldn't eat with them or speak to them. They lived in isolation, even though they were surrounded by Gentiles.

But such logic is strong enough to convince only those who want to be convinced and who are looking to defend their own prejudices. The Pharisees would have to ignore so much of the very Scriptures they claimed to know so well. That same chapter in Leviticus instructed that they should leave the gleanings of their fields and vineyards for the poor and the "sojourner," who was not a Jew but a resident alien. They would have to ignore the powerful statement at the end of the chapter which speaks to racial discrimination: "The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God" (Lev 19:34).

And there are other commandments which they would have to ignore: "If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it" (Exod 23:4-5). "If you see your brother's ox or sheep straying, do not ignore it but be sure to take it back to him" (Deut 22:1). In other words, they were commanded to treat their enemies' belongings the same way as their brothers'. The rabbis must have known the teaching of the book of Proverbs, which the apostle Paul later quoted, "If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink" (Prov 25:21).

So the rabbis had no justification for changing God's command to love their neighbor into a permission to hate those who hated them. Nowhere in Scripture does God teach his people a double standard of morality, one for friends and one for enemies.

That is why Jesus goes on to contradict the Pharisees' gross distortion of the law with these words:

**"But I say to you, love your enemies,**

As Jesus so clearly illustrated in the parable of the Good Samaritan, our neighbor is not necessarily someone from our own race, religion, economic status or social standing. He may not have any connection with us. He may even be our enemy, someone who is out to get us. In God's vocabulary, "neighbor" includes one's ene-

my. What makes him our neighbor is that he is a fellow human being in need, and we are in a position to help.

Jesus continues:

**love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.**

In other words, love your enemies, because that is what God does. God loves unbelievers. The rains fall on the lands of non-Christian as well as Christian farmers. The sun shines on the fields and lives of the most hardcore pagans. That is because God loves them. He sends joy and happiness and a measure of peace into the homes of non-Christians as well as Christians—because he loves them. And so must his sons and daughters. If we are going to reflect the family likeness, then we need to love people as God does.

And that love will be reflected in both our words and actions. True love is not merely feeling compassion; it is practically meeting the needs of others. Our enemy is trying to hurt us, but we must try to help him. He seeks our harm, we must seek his good—because that is how God treats us. We must remember that when we were God's enemies, when we hated him and blatantly opposed him, Christ died for us in order to reconcile us to God.

And words are powerful tools to express our love. Jesus said, "Bless those who persecute you." Here we are commanded to pray for our enemies. Many see this as the pinnacle of Christian love. Bonhoeffer said, "This is the supreme command. Through the medium of prayer we go to our enemy, stand by his side, and plead for him to God."

Praying for our enemies may be an internal expression of love, but it is also a way to increase our love as well, because it is impossible to keep on praying for people without discovering that our love for them is growing. So we should not wait to feel differently about someone before we pray for them. If we pray for them daily we will see our own hearts change. Remember Jesus prayed for his enemies while the iron spikes were being driven through his hands and feet, not when the crucifixion was over and men were sorry for what they had done, but in the very moment when it was being carried out. In fact, the tense of the verb indicates that Jesus kept on repeating his prayer, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." If the cruel torture of a crucifixion could not silence our Lord's prayer for his enemies, what pain inflicted by others can possibly justify the silencing of ours?

Jesus continues his discourse by asking a series of questions (verse 46):

**"For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the**

**same? And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (5:46-48)**

By “perfect,” Jesus means complete in regard to love. “Perfect” means to fill something out to its fullest extent. Jesus wants us to love people like God loves them. Nobody can be perfect in the sense of being sinless, but because we have the love of God resident within us we can love people on a deeper level. We can even love those who don’t love us. That is why Jesus says, “For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the same?”

Fallen man is not incapable of loving. The fact that humanity is depraved doesn’t mean that men and women can’t do anything good at all, but simply that the good they do is tainted in some way. Unbelievers can love. Parental love, friendship love, romantic love, all of these are the regular experiences of those outside of Christ. Jesus says even the tax gatherers (the petty customs officials who because of their extortion had a reputation for greed) loved those who loved them.

But all human love, even the highest and noblest, is contaminated in some way by the impurity of self-interest. Christians are called to something greater, something that is impossible apart from the grace of God: to love our enemies (a love in which there is no self-interest). If we love only those people who love us we aren’t any different than extortionists. If we hang around only our brothers and sisters than we are no better than pagans.

Jesus’ question is, “What are you doing more than others?” Is there anything really special about us? What do our non-Christian friends think of us? Do they regard us merely as people who don’t do certain things, who go to meetings, carry Bibles, use a certain vocabulary, dress a certain way and have a strange code of ethics they find it difficult to relate to? Or do they see us as people who genuinely love them, care for them and are interested in them to an extent that no one else is? That comes from God—and it can only come from God. Not one of us can live like that.

I want to share with you a story of a college student at Duke University who went to hear Tony Campolo speak and as a result responded to Campolo’s invitation to sign up for an inner city ministry in Philadelphia. Here is his story, in his words:

“In mid-June I met about a hundred other kids in a Baptist church in Philadelphia. We had about an hour of church. We were really worked up, all enthusiastic and ready to go. Dr. Campolo then preached for about an hour, and when he finished, people were shouting, standing on the pews clapping. It was great. “Okay, gang, are you ready to go out there and tell em about Jesus?” he asked. “Yeah, let’s go,” we shouted back.

“Get on the bus!” Tony shouted. So we spilled out of the church and onto the bus. We were singing, clapping.

But then we began to drive deeper into the depths of the city. We weren’t in a great neighborhood when we started riding, but it got worse. Gradually we stopped singing, and everybody, all of us, were just staring out the windows. We were scared. Then the bus pulled up before one of the worst-looking housing projects in Philadelphia. Tony jumped on the bus and said, “All right gang, get out there and tell ‘em about Jesus.” We made our hesitant way off the bus, stood there on the corner and had prayer, then we spread out. I walked down the sidewalk and stopped before a huge tenement house. I gulped, said a prayer, and ventured inside. There was a terrible odor. Windows were out. No lights in the hall. I walked up one flight of stairs toward the door where I heard a baby crying. I knocked on the door.

“Who is it?” said a loud voice inside. Then the door was cracked open and a woman holding a naked baby peered out at me. “What do you want?” she asked in a harsh, mean voice.

I told her that I wanted to tell her about Jesus. With that, she swung the door open and began cursing me. She cursed me all the way down the hall, down the flight of steps, out to the sidewalk.

I felt terrible. “Look at me,” I said to myself. “Some Mr. Christian I am. How in the world could somebody like me think I could tell someone about Jesus?”

I sat down on the curb and cried. Then I looked up and noticed a store on the corner, windows all boarded up, bars over the door. I went to the store, walked in, looked around. Then I remembered. The baby had no diapers. The mother was smoking. I bought a box of diapers and a pack of cigarettes.

I walked back to the tenement house, said a prayer, walked in, walked up the flight of stairs, gulped, stood before the door, and knocked.

“Who is it?” said the voice inside. When she opened the door, I slid that box of diapers and those cigarettes in. She looked at them, looked at me, and said, “Come in.”

I stepped into the dingy apartment. “Sit down!” she commanded. I sat down.

I sat on the sofa and began playing with the baby. I put a diaper on the baby, even though I have never put one on before. When the woman offered me a cigarette, even though I don’t smoke, I smoked. I stayed there all afternoon, talking, playing with the baby, *smoking*, listening to the woman.

About four o’clock the woman looked at me and said, “Let me ask you something. What’s a nice boy like you doing in a place like this?” So I told her everything I knew about Jesus. It took me about five minutes. Then she said, “Pray for me and my baby that we can make it out of here alive.” And I prayed.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus asks, “And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others?” Authentic Christianity has that “more than” quality about it. It’s called grace.

We see a progression in these last two antitheses of Jesus. The first, which we looked at last week, was negative, “Do not resist one who is evil.” This one is positive, “Love your enemies.” The first was passive, calling

us to non-retaliation; the second is positive, calling us to an active love. Augustine put it this way, "Many have learned how to offer the other cheek, but do not know how to love him by whom they were struck." We must go beyond forgiveness to tender love, concerning ourselves more with the misery of the person from whom the criticism came than our own misery; showing our critics mercy, serving them, praying earnestly for them, refusing to wrong them or withdraw from them, taking their wrongs as God takes ours.

Is there a cost to living in this way? Certainly! But Jesus stated that paradox again and again: if we try to save ourselves, we will lose ourselves; if we lose ourselves for his sake, we will save ourselves in the end. It was one of his favorite sayings.

This means we must measure our lives by losses rather than gains; by sacrifices rather than self-preservation; by time spent for others rather than time saved for ourselves; by love poured out rather than love poured in. It's a rule of life: give away the truth that God has given to you and he will give you greater truths for yourself and for others. Give your time away and you will have more time to give. Set no limit on your love and you

will find in the act of loving that you have more love for others than ever before.

Let us pray as George MacDonald prayed: "O God, make me into a rock which swallows up the waves of wrong in its great caverns and never throws them back to swell the commotion of the angry sea from whence they came. Ah! To annihilate wrong in this way—to say, 'It shall not be wrong against me, so utterly do I forgive it!'"

1. Quoted in Doug Webster, *The Easy Yoke*, (NavPress, 1996) 135-137.

I am indebted to John R.W. Stott for his excellent book, *The Sermon on the Mount*. I have borrowed extensively from his lecture series.

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# WHEN RELIGION BECOMES THEATER

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Catalog No. 1094

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

16th Message

Gary Vanderet

August 17th, 1997

One of the disturbing things about Jesus was his inclination to push morality beyond what seems possible. This was especially true with regard to his teaching on humility. In Matthew 23, he warned believers to not take titles too seriously. We should not let these things go to our heads. Here is how he put it: "Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled." That fundamental principle concerning pride and humility occurs a number of times in his teaching. It was one of his favorite sayings.

C. S. Lewis pointed out that pride is the essential vice, the ultimate evil. He said: "Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness and all that are mere fleabites in comparison: it was through pride that the devil became the devil. Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of man." And because pride is at the center of our resistance to God, God himself resists it. As James put it in his letter: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." When we choose to be great, we forfeit God's grace.

If Lewis' observations are correct, then humility, the opposite of pride, releases God's greatness. In other words, if pride leads to every other vice, humility leads to every other virtue. Humility is the very basis of our relationship with God and our usefulness in this world. Thomas à Kempis said: "The more humble a man is in himself, and the more subject unto God, so much more prudent shall he be in all his affairs, and enjoy greater peace and quiet of heart."

The first step toward humility is realizing how proud we are. Pride can be demonstrated in very subtle ways. Let me suggest a few from my own experience: insisting on recognition, pouting when we aren't consulted or asked our opinion, dominating social situations, loving to tell our stories rather than listening to others, resisting authority, getting angry when we are challenged, harboring a grudge or nursing a grievance, wallowing in self-pity, and the one that is the center of our text this morning, wanting to be noticed, to be prominent and eminent.

So we return to our study in the Sermon on the Mount. This text is probably the best known of all of Jesus' teaching, and almost certainly the least obeyed. It is the nearest thing to a manifesto that he ever uttered, for it is his own description of what he wanted his followers to be and do. The Sermon on the Mount is the best explanation and the clearest illustration of what true Christianity is all about.

The key to unlocking this section is found in verse 1 of chapter 6, where we resume our study. Jesus said:

**"Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. (Matt 6:1, NASB)**

One of the things to look for in studying Scripture is statements that are repeated. In this section there are two,

which we will find are used three additional times in the rest of the passage. The first is "to be seen by men"; the second, "to have their reward." The primary motivation of the Pharisees, which is true of anyone who is committed to outward conformity, is to be seen by men. The Pharisees publicly and deliberately did what they did religiously, in order to be seen by men. They did it in their giving, in their praying, and in their fasting.

The phrase "they have their reward" means "to fully receive a transaction." If you buy an item in a department store and charge it, when the bill comes you pay for it, and you get a receipt. The piece of paper shows that it was "paid in full."

Jesus is not saying if you practice your righteousness before men to be noticed by them you don't have a reward. On the contrary, if you give to be seen by men, if you pray to be seen by men, if you fast to be seen by men, then what you have is a fully receipted transaction. You did what you did to be seen by men, and you were seen by men, end of deal. Remember this principle as we look at each section. Jesus is moving from the general to the specific. He begins with a warning: Don't do this! And then he shows three ways in which we can do what he has warned against.

First, in verses 2-4, Jesus says, we can do it in our giving:

**"When therefore you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you. (6:2-4)**

We don't speak of giving "alms" very much anymore. The word means a deed of mercy or pity, giving to the poor. The Old Testament has much to say about compassion for the poor. Since our God is merciful, as Jesus has just emphasized, and he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish, his people must be kind and merciful too. Jesus obviously expected his disciples to be generous givers. We might add that giving to the poor was relatively unknown among the pagan nations.

Luke records this saying of Jesus, in Acts 20:35 (it's not in the gospels): "In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus himself: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" This is one of the great lessons we need to learn in life.

But, as we have seen earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, God is concerned not only with our actions but with our motivation. The Pharisees had turned this hum-

ble, gracious act of giving into a self-centered show. The picture here is of a Pharisee going to a prominent place in the community, or on his way to put money into the special bowl at the temple or synagogue, preceded by trumpeters, blowing a fanfare and attracting a crowd. "They pretended, no doubt," wrote John Calvin, "that it was to call the poor, but it was perfectly obvious that they were hunting for applause and commendation." People would come running out of their homes to find the Pharisee giving to the needy. This practice became known as "sounding the trumpet."

There was another way one could blow the trumpet, metaphorically speaking. In the Temple area there were six prominently located offering receptacles, each one constructed of metal. If one wanted to give, say, a dollar (in our terms) in order to impress the brothers, he would drop into the receptacle a hundred pennies, making a lot of noise in the process. This became known as "sounding the trumpet." As Spurgeon put it: "To stand with a penny in one hand and a trumpet in the other is the posture of hypocrisy."

And hypocrisy is the word Jesus used to characterize this display. The word translated "hypocrite" comes from the world of the theater. In classical Greek, the *hupokrites* was an actor; thus the word came to be applied to anybody who treats the world as a stage on which he plays a part. He lays aside his true identity and assumes a false one. He is no longer himself; he is impersonating somebody else. In a play, nobody is hurt or feels deceived when the actors play their parts; the audience knows it is all part of the drama. The problem with a religious hypocrite, however, is that he deliberately tries to deceive people. He is like an actor in that he is pretending, so that what the audience sees is not the real person but a disguise; but he is unlike the actor in that he takes some religious practice and turns it into what it was never meant to be, namely, a piece of make-believe, a theatrical display before an audience; and it is all done for applause.

Human nature hasn't changed much, has it? It boosts our ego to see our name displayed as a supporter of various charities. We fall prey to the same temptation. We draw attention to our giving in order to be "praised by men." Seeing our names exalted in public is a great morale-booster. Every one of us has probably received a solicitation to give, based on this very motivation. If you give a certain amount, they will put your name here. If you give enough, you can probably have a stadium named after you. We may not employ a troop of trumpeters to blow a fanfare each time we give to a church or charity, yet, to use the familiar metaphor, we like to "blow our own trumpet."

Jesus says: "Don't do that." Don't scream for attention, like Tarzan swinging through the jungle. Stay out of the picture. Remain anonymous. Resist the desire to have your name plastered all over the place.

When you give, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Normally, the right hand is the active one; so Jesus assumes that is the hand we use when we hand over our gift. Then he adds that our left hand must not be watching. It's not hard to understand what he means. Not only are we not to tell other people about our Christian giving, we are not to be self-conscious in our giving. In other words, don't make a big deal out of giving. Don't give to impress others, or yourself. It was Spurgeon

who said: "God observes, and he is enough of an audience."

Of course, it is impossible to obey precisely and literally this command of Jesus. As John Stott writes: "If we keep accounts and plan our giving, as conscientious Christians should, we are bound to know how much we give away. We cannot very well close our eyes while writing out our checks! But as soon as we give the gift we ought to forget it. Don't keep recalling it to gloat over it . . . Our giving ought to be marked by self-sacrifice and self-forgetfulness, not by self congratulation."

Prayer is the second area in which we can be hypocritical. Jesus gives the instruction, in vv 5-6, and an example of how to pray, in vv 7-16. (We will look at the example of prayer next week.)

**"And when you pray, you are not to be as the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners, in order to be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (6:5-6)**

The Lord is not condemning public prayer; he is talking about praying as a hypocrite. The question we need to ask ourselves is: "When we pray, who is the audience?" Jesus pictures two men at prayer. Again, the basic difference drawn is between hypocrisy and reality. He compares the reason for their praying, and its reward. Stott writes: "What he says of the hypocrites sounds fine at first: They love...to pray. But unfortunately, it is not prayer which they love, or the God they are supposed to be praying to." They love themselves and they love the opportunity that public praying gives them to show off.

There was nothing wrong with their method or their discipline. All devout Jews prayed three times daily. And there was nothing wrong in standing, the usual posture for prayer. It's not even wrong to pray at the street corners as well as in the synagogues if our motive is to bring the awareness of God out of the holy places and into everyday life. But Jesus uncovered their true motive as they stood in the synagogue or street with hands uplifted to heaven: it was that they might be seen by men. Behind their piety lurked pride. What they really wanted was applause. And they got it: "they have their reward in full," said Jesus.

How then should Christians pray? Jesus says: Go into your inner room, shut your door, and pray to your Father who is in secret. Or as the Jerusalem Bible clarifies it: "who is in that secret place." Our Father is there, waiting to welcome us. In fact, he is calling us.

This one thing has done more to affect my prayer life, my quiet times (or whatever one wants to call those times) than anything else. Prayer is not a discipline (like doing fifty push-ups a day) that I have to do to be a mature Christian. It is the Lord who is calling me, wanting to meet with me. Remember David's words in Psalm 27: "When you say to my soul, seek my face; your face O Lord I will seek." One scholar points out that the Greek word for the "inner room" into which we are to withdraw to pray was used for the store-room where treasures were kept. There are treasures already awaiting us when we pray. God wants to refresh our soul, satisfy our hunger, quench our thirst, and

remind us that we have been forgiven.

But our problem is that we live in a world where God is invisible. We think he doesn't exist. But he does. He is right here in the room with us. Heaven is not a place way off somewhere up there. It is another dimension. It is all around us, an unseen realm. Part of growing up is developing eyes that see, knowing that there is a realm of reality out there that is just as real as the realm that we can see. So God is here with us as we meet and he is seeking us.

Prayer is the highest expression of our dependence on God. When we realize how inadequate we are for what he has called us to be and asked us to do, we are driven to prayer. Prayer is a response to his revelation. It is like having a conversation with a friend. As you read the Word you begin to see how much God loves you. When you see that underneath are the everlasting arms, how much you are forgiven, how God has given and continues to give of himself, you respond. Prayer is that loving, gracious response of our hearts to what God is saying.

David describes his times with God as a meeting. He says: "Where can I go and meet with you?" That is a wonderful way of looking at our times with God: it is a meeting. He invites us to come and meet with him.

The warning here is against showing off in prayer with syrupy words and high sounding platitudes in an effort to appear holy.

Ray Stedman told the story about a prayer meeting where one supplicational show-off stood up and began to pray one of those long theological prayers. He was scraping the Milky Way with phrases like: "O God who sitteth upon the circle of the earth for whom the inhabitants are like grasshoppers." He went on and on until finally, someone sitting behind him tapped him on the shoulder and whispered: "Just call him Father, and ask him for something."

God is our Father. We should pray to him and forget whoever else is listening. That is why I love to listen to the prayers of new Christians. Their prayers are so refreshing! I remember one man praying: "God, this is Ed. Do you remember me? I met you last week." It's wonderful to hear someone pray who is just himself, talking to God. Don't show off when you pray.

In Scripture we see that prayers in public are relatively brief, while prayers in private are often very long. Remember that our Savior spent an entire night in prayer on several occasions.

The purpose of Jesus' emphasis on "secret" prayer is to purify our motives in praying. As we are to give out of a genuine love for people, so we are to pray out of a genuine love for God. We must never use either of these exercises as a pious cloak for self love.

This brings us to the third area that Jesus mentions. Verse 16:

**"And whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face so that you may not be seen fasting by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you." (6:16-18)**

The Pharisees fasted twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays. We could spend a lot of time talking about fasting this morning, but that is not the point here. This passage of Scripture is almost ignored by believers. I suspect that some of us live our Christian lives as if these verses had been torn out of our Bibles. Most Christians lay stress on daily prayer and sacrificial giving, but few pay any attention to fasting.

"Fasting" here refers to abstaining from food partially or totally for a period of time. We call our first meal of the day breakfast, because that is when we break our night-long fast. But fasting can include denying ourselves things other than food. We can go on an information fast. We can turn off our computers and abstain from pouring information into our heads every day. We can turn off the television for a while and devote time to prayer and thoughtfulness. There are all kinds of ways we can make a choice to live with discipline in order to devote ourselves to what is important.

In Scripture, there are three major reasons given for fasting. One is sorrow for sin. When people were deeply distressed over their sin and guilt, they would both weep and fast. For example, Nehemiah assembled the people "with fasting and in sackcloth," and they "stood and confessed their sins." When the people of Nineveh repented at Jonah's preaching, they proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth. When fasting was first instituted in the Old Testament, it was required only once a year, on the Day of Atonement. People were to fast as they mourned, in confession of their sin.

The second occasion when people fasted was in times of bereavement or national calamity. David spent many days fasting as he mourned the death of Saul. If there were no autumn rains, the Jews would commit themselves to fasting, because that was a national crisis. It is an interesting question to ask ourselves, if we live in a time of national crisis.

There is a third reason given in Scripture for fasting, and that is, as special times of concentration for spiritual purposes. In fact, "prayer and fasting" are often mentioned together during times when men and women sought God's direction or blessing. Moses fasted on Mount Sinai immediately after the covenant was renewed by which God had taken Israel to be his people. Ezra "proclaimed a fast" before leading the exiles back to Jerusalem, "that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from him a straight way." The Lord Jesus fasted immediately before his public ministry began, and the early church followed his example. The church of Antioch fasted before Paul and Barnabas were sent out on the first missionary journey; and Paul and Barnabas themselves fasted before appointing elders in every new church they planted.

The issue here is not when, but how. Though fasting is not a part of Old Testament law, or a command in the New Testament, it is assumed by Jesus that Christians will practice it. That is what he did.

So whether it is to mourn over sin, or for prayer, self-discipline or direction, there are good Biblical reasons for fasting. Jesus' concern here was that, as with our giving and praying, we should not draw attention to ourselves when we fast. When the hypocrites fasted, they looked



gloomy and neglected their appearance. The word translated “gloomy” means literally to “make to disappear”—so they were unrecognizable. We are not sure whether that meant they neglected personal hygiene, whether they covered their heads with sackcloth or perhaps smeared their faces with ashes in order to look pale and melancholy and holy—all so that their fasting might be seen and known by everybody. The admiration of the onlookers would be all the reward they would get. “But as for you, my disciples,” Jesus went on, “when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face”—that is, “brush your hair and wash your face.” Then, once again, your Father who sees in secret will reward you. The purpose of fasting is not to advertise ourselves but to discipline ourselves; not to gain a reputation but to express our humility before God and our concern for others in need. If these purposes are fulfilled, that will be reward enough.

Once again, the point here is that when you fast, don’t do it to be seen by men. Don’t fail to put on your make-up. Don’t go about with a pious look on your face, trying to impress everybody that you are fasting. Don’t try to appear humble and sad, trying to look hungry and exhausted like someone who just finished crossing the Sahara that afternoon.

My friend David Roper tells a story about a man in a mission organization who always wore the same pair of brown wool pants. David said he never could figure out why the man always wore them, until one time he noticed that the nap was worn off the material at the knees. He said he never actually knew the man’s motivation, but he wondered if he wore the pants to give the impression that he was a spiritual person.

It is easy to fall into the trap of trying to look good instead of being good. We need to be natural, down to earth, ordinary people. As Popeye the cartoon character puts it: “I am what I am.” We need to be just what we are, transparent and honest.

In these verses Jesus has been contrasting two different kinds of life. One is showy, motivated by pride and rewarded by men; the other is secret, motivated by humility and rewarded by God.

The exhortation to us this morning is to carefully choose our audience. What is it that matters most to us, people’s applause or our heavenly Father’s approval? Jesus says that our Father wants to reward us and bless us. He wants us to know how much he loves us. When our children sing for the congregation on Sunday, all they can think about is their happy parents who are watching them. They want your approval, your smile, your love. That is how God wants us to live, as an offering to him. What our Father is saying is: “I am delighted about the things you think and the things you have done. You made an offering of your life to me and I accept it wholeheartedly!”

I want to close by reading a prayer that I keep close to my computer in my study. I have lived most of my life trying to look good, not realizing that God had already made me good and I didn’t need to act that way anymore. This prayer is a constant reminder to me of the attitude God is calling us to model.

*From the desire of being esteemed,  
From the desire of being loved,  
From the desire of being extolled,  
From the desire of being honored,  
From the desire of being praised,  
From the desire of being preferred to others,  
From the desire of being consulted,  
From the desire of being approved;  
From the fear of being humiliated,  
From the fear of being despised,  
From the fear of suffering rebuke,  
From the fear of being falsely accused,  
From the fear of being forgotten,  
From the fear of being ridiculed,  
From the fear of being wronged,  
From the fear of being suspected;  
Deliver me, Jesus,  
That others may be loved more than I,  
That others may be esteemed more than I,  
That in the opinion of the world others may increase and I  
may decrease,  
That others may be chosen and I set aside,  
That others may be praised and I unnoticed,  
That others may be preferred before me in everything,  
That others may become holier than I,  
provided that I may become as holy as I should.  
Jesus, grant me the grace to desire it.*

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I am indebted to John R.W. Stott for his excellent book, *The Sermon on the Mount*. I have borrowed extensively from his lecture series.



# TALKING TO OUR FATHER

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Catalog No. 1095

Matthew 6:7-15

17th Message

Gary Vanderet

August 24th, 1997

One thing I will always remember about Ray Stedman is the vast collection of poems, jingles and sayings he had memorized and from which he would quote at random. One piece I remember in particular was this little poem he recited once when he was preaching on the subject of prayer:

"The proper way for a man to pray,"  
Said Deacon Lemuel Keyes,  
"And the only proper attitude  
Is down upon the knees."

"No, I should say the way to pray,"  
Said Reverend Doctor Wise,  
"Is standing straight with arms outstretched  
And rapt and upturned eyes."

"Oh, no, no, no," said Elder Shaw,  
"Such posture is too proud.  
A man should pray with eyes fast closed  
And head contritely bowed."

"It seems to me his hands should be  
Austerely clasped in front  
With both thumbs pointing toward the ground,"  
Said Reverend Doctor Blunt.

"Last year I fell in Hodgekin's well  
Headfirst," said Cyrus Brown,  
"With both heels a-stickin' up  
And my head a-pointin' down.  
And I prayed a prayer right then and there,  
The best prayer I ever said,  
The prayingest prayer I ever prayed,  
Was standin' on my head."

That is funny, of course, but it is quite profound when you think about it, because prayer is the highest expression of our desperation and our dependence on God. Once we realize the enormity what we are called to do as Christians, we are driven to pray. Prayer springs forth from us impulsively and instinctively in the face of overwhelming necessity. When we're pushed beyond our limits, frightened out of our wits, and pressed out of our comfort zone, we resort to prayer almost out of reflex.

We have to admit that we are always needy. We're inadequate, deficient, and desperately dependent on God. Without him we can do nothing—and prayer is the highest expression of that dependence.

It is startling to think that our Lord himself was a dependent being. In the incarnation he laid aside the independent use of his deity. His humiliation included taking on human weakness and ignorance. He was wholly dependent on his Father and never acted out of his deity. He had

no wisdom, no power and no righteousness of his own. He, like us, had to rely on God every moment of every day. He continually told his disciples: "I only do what I see the Father doing. I only say what I hear the Father saying." He also said to them: "By myself, I can do nothing."

And Jesus expressed that dependency in prayer. Prayer for him was the expression of a deeply felt need. Prayer was the environment in which he lived, the very air he breathed. In the midst of continual interruption, a full schedule, and people's needs and cries, he managed to maintain his communion with God.

His disciples finally realized that this was the secret of his life. One day they came to him, and as usual he was praying. When he had finished, they asked him: "Lord teach us to pray." They didn't ask him to teach them how to study or how to preach. They knew that the secret to his life was his relationship with his Father. That is why they asked him to teach them to pray. His answer to their request is the prayer that we will look at this morning in our study in the Sermon on the Mount. That answer is given in Luke 11, but Jesus often repeated the most important things, and that is what he has done here in chapter 6 of Matthew's gospel.

The disciples realized that for Jesus, prayer was a necessity. Praying was more than an occasional practice on his part; it was a lifelong habit, an attitude of mind and heart. Everything he did sprang from a life of prayer. It can be truly said that Jesus "prayed without ceasing." The disciples must have seen that prayer for him was not only necessary, it was also perfectly natural. He did not have to struggle or drive himself. Prayer was not an act of self-discipline; nor was it ever a duty, it was always a delight.

Jesus had no sense of reluctance to pray or that prayer was a requirement he had to fulfill. He never seemed to have to drag himself away from something in order to pray. Why was that? Again, it was because his actions arose out of an overwhelming sense of need. He simply faced up to the fact that without this relationship with his Father, what he did was a waste of time. He could put in hours of activity but it would accomplish nothing. And out of that deep, urgent sense of need, that awareness that he was but an empty channel, a vessel through whom the Father worked, arose his life of prayer.

The Lord's Prayer is a primer on prayer. In it Jesus provides a model of how we should pray, not what we should pray. This prayer, which is made up of six petitions, falls into two rather obvious divisions. It is highlighted by the use of two pronouns. The first three petitions have to do with God and his glory, and for these Jesus uses the pronoun *thy*: "Thy name, thy kingdom, thy will." The second three have to do with us and our well being, and Jesus uses the pronoun *us*: "Give us, forgive us, lead us."

Jesus begins his instruction on prayer with a warning. Matthew 6:7:

**“And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition, as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need, before you ask Him. Pray, then, in this way:**

**‘Our Father who art in heaven, (Matt 6:7-9)**

We have already seen that when it comes to prayer, one sin we must avoid is hypocrisy. Jesus now raises another thing to avoid in prayer, and that is verbosity, vain repetition or meaningless, mechanical utterances. This is to reduce prayer from a real and personal approach to God to a mere reciting of words. In some religions, people use what they call a “prayer wheel” on which they write out their prayer and then turn the wheel as fast as they can. They think that the more revolutions the wheel makes, the more times God will hear them, and therefore they have a better chance at getting him to answer their prayer.

The phrase “meaningless repetition” describes any and every prayer that is all words and no meaning, all lips and no mind or heart—a torrent of mechanical and mindless words. That would certainly include a mindless praying of the rosary in which nothing happens but a fingering of beads and a mere reciting of words. Jesus is referring to any kind of prayer made with the mouth when the mind is not engaged.

Some people think that the more they say, the more likely they are to be heard. What an foolish notion! What sort of God would be chiefly impressed by the mechanics and the statistics of prayer, and whose response is determined by the volume of words used and the number of hours spent in prayer?

The essential difference between a Pharisee’s prayer, an unbeliever’s prayer and a Christian’s prayer lies in the kind of God we pray to. That is why this pattern prayer begins with a word of relationship: “Our Father.” It is essential to know whom we are praying to. Most of our prayer times involve immediately rushing into a series of pleading petitions that have to do with our problems, our needs and irritations. But this merely serves to focus our attention upon what is already troubling us, and we often end up more depressed or more frustrated than when we began. But Jesus shows us another way. We must begin with God. We must take a slow, calm, reassuring gaze at him, at his greatness and his eagerness to give, his unwearied patience and untiring love.

Jesus tell us to address God as (literally), “our Father in the heavens.” This is very important. It implies, first, that God is personal. He is as much “he” as I am “I.” Secondly, he is loving. He himself fulfills the ideal of fatherhood in his loving care for his children. Thirdly, he is powerful. He is not only good, but great. The words “in the heavens” denote not where he lives so much as the authority and power at his command as the creator and ruler of all things. The point is, God combines fatherly love with heavenly power, and what his love directs his power is able to perform.

When Jesus encourages us to call God “our Father in heaven,” he is not teaching the correct etiquette in approaching God; rather, he wants us to come to God in the

right frame of mind. Before we pray, we need to consciously remind ourselves who he is, so that we approach our loving Father in heaven with the right attitude of humility and confidence.

The word Jesus uses for Father is not a formal term. It was the common Aramaic word “Abba,” which children used to address their father. One New Testament scholar argues convincingly that Abba was the original Aramaic word on Jesus’ lips here, as it was in all but one of his prayers in the New Testament. That was the word he would have used to address his earthly father, Joseph. Everyone used this word, but no one used it for God. “Abba” meant “Daddy.” Jesus transformed the relationship with God into an intimate bond, and he taught his disciples to pray with the same intimacy.

This is to be the foundational awareness of all our prayer. Paul tells us in Galatians: “Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father.’” The apostle repeats this in Romans: “For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’”

That God is our Abba-Father is a truth that we must cultivate for the health of our souls. This is one of the most healing doctrines in all of Scripture.

We are to pray to a Father who has a father’s heart, a father’s love and a father’s strength. The first and truest note of prayer must be our recognition that this is the kind of Father we are praying to. We must hear him and approach him as a child, in trust and simplicity, and with all the frankness of a child, otherwise what we are doing is not praying.

I must confess my own lack in this area. I lost my father when I was less than a year old. It has only been in recent years that I began to realize how hurtful that has been to me. It has been difficult for me to trust God as my Father. In fact, for most of my life I thought I did not have a father. My wife Kathy and I attended a retreat this summer in Colorado, and the man who was leading the retreat asked me to write a letter to my father. I tried to, but I just could not write it. I began to cry. Instead of living with the fact that I had lost my father, I was living as if I had never had one. For many of us, the lack of a loving relationship with a caring father has a dramatic effect on how we view God and how we approach him.

When we have taken the time and trouble to orientate ourselves towards God, and recollect that he is our personal, loving, powerful Father, then the content of our prayers will be radically affected in two ways. First, God’s concerns will be given priority (“your name, your kingdom, your will”); and secondly, our own needs, though demoted to second place, will yet be completely committed to him (“Give us, forgive us, deliver us”).

Let us look then at the first three petitions (verse 9):

**“Pray, then, in this way:**

**‘Our Father who art in heaven,**

**Hallowed be Thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come.**

**Thy will be done,**

**On earth as it is in heaven. (6:9-10)**

These first three petitions express our concern for God’s

glory in relation to his name, rule and will. If we imagine God to be an impersonal force, then he wouldn't have any personal name or rule or will to be concerned about.

Today, names do not mean very much; they are merely labels to identify people. We are more concerned with how names sound than what they mean. But in the Ancient Near East, a name was considered to indicate character; it corresponded to the person. This is especially true when it is applied to the name of God. For the Jew, God's name referred to the reality of God. So God's "name" is who he is. He is already "holy," but we pray that he may be hallowed, "treated as holy," because we desire that the honor he deserves would be given to him: in our own lives, and in the world.

**'Thy kingdom come.**

God has a plan—and Jesus Christ is going to rule in that plan. That is what Psalm 2 declares:

**Why do the nations conspire  
and the peoples plot in vain?  
The kings of the earth take their stand  
and the rulers gather together  
against the Lord  
and against his Anointed One.  
"Let us break their chains," they say,  
"and throw off their fetters."  
The One enthroned in heaven laughs;  
the Lord scoffs at them.  
[Because he says]  
"I have installed my King  
on Zion, my holy hill." (Ps 2:1-6, NIV)**

God's program and his interests must be our first concern. But we often spend the bulk of our time praying about our programs and kingdom: "Lord, bless our program."

**'Thy will be done,  
On earth as it is in heaven.**

Is God's will done in heaven? Is it done on earth? In heaven, nobody objects to what God decides. The only objection heard is on earth. And it is always among human beings, never among animals or nature. Nature always conforms. No one has ever seen a squirrel get up in the morning and say, "I'm tired of collecting nuts!" The retreat that I mentioned earlier was held in the Colorado Rockies, at an elevation of 8,500 feet. The beauty of it all was breathtaking to me. It was a testimony to the glory of God.

The will of God is "good, acceptable and perfect," because it is the will of "our Father in heaven," who is infinite in knowledge, love, and power. It is foolish to resist God's will, therefore, and wise to discern, desire and do it. What Jesus wants us to pray is that life on earth may come to approximate more closely life in heaven.

And so these first requests are a prayer of surrender. We are praying: "May my life be a source of delight to you; may your name be honored; may you have your rightful place; may your will be done in my life." This is what David prayed at the end of Psalm 19: "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer."

The trouble is, we know there are great areas of our life that are not hallowed, where God is not reigning, where his will is not being done. We reserve certain places to our-

selves, privileged areas which we do not wish to surrender where the name of our boss or our girl friend or some other person means more to us than the name of God.

We are constantly being pressured to conform to the self-centeredness of our culture. We become concerned about our name (seeing it embossed on note paper, or defending it when it is attacked), about our own empires (bossing other people around and manipulating them) and about our own silly little will (always wanting our own way and getting upset when it is frustrated). But Jesus reminds us that our top concern is not our name, our kingdom and will, but God's.

The second half of the prayer moves from God's affairs to our own, as the adjective shifts from "your" to "our." Having expressed our concern for God's glory, we now express our humble dependence on his grace. Verse 11:

**'Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our  
debtors.  
And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us  
from evil.  
[For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the  
glory, forever. Amen.]'**

**"For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your  
heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do  
not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive  
your transgressions." (6:11-15)**

Prayer by its very nature is requesting. It is not insisting or clamoring. We can't make any demands of God or make deals with him. We don't have to. We are coming to a loving Father, a friend. We ask, and then we wait with patience and submission until he gives us what we request, or something more.

Since God is "our Father in heaven," and loves us with a father's love, he is concerned for our total welfare. He wants us to bring our needs (all of them!) trustingly, to him: our need for food and for forgiveness, our need to be delivered from evil.

**'Give us this day our daily bread.**

Notice Jesus doesn't say our "cake." Bread symbolizes everything that is necessary to sustain life: food, health, shelter—the necessities, not the luxuries of life. Jesus wants us to be conscious of a day-to-day dependence. The word "daily" can be translated either "for the current day" or "for the following day." This is a prayer for the immediate, not the distant future. As A. M. Hunter comments: "Used in the morning, this petition would ask bread for the day just beginning. Used in the evening, it would pray for tomorrow's bread." The point is, we are to live a day at a time.

**'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven  
our debtors.**

Forgiveness is as indispensable to the life and health of the soul as food is for the body. Sin is likened to a debt, because it deserves to be punished. But when God forgives sin, he remits the penalty and drops the charge against us. This prayer can be the healing salve for a fractured relationship. Jesus is not saying: "If you forgive, then God will forgive." He is saying: "If you won't forgive, then you are not forgiven." God forgives only those who repent; and

one of the chief evidences of true repentance is a forgiving spirit. If we refuse to forgive and have no desire to do so (not whether we struggle with forgiving; we are all in the same boat as far as that is concerned), there can be but one reason, and that is that we have never understood the grace of Christ. We are unforgiven ourselves.

We are never more like God than when we forgive.

**'And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil** [this would be better translated "deliver us from the evil one."]

It is the devil who is in view here. He is the one who tempts us to sin, and from whom we need to be rescued. This petition is more concerned with overcoming temptation than avoiding it. Perhaps we could paraphrase this request in these words: "Do not allow us so to be led into temptation that it overwhelms us, but rescue us from the evil one." Jesus is implying that the devil is too strong for us, but that our heavenly Father will deliver us if we call upon him. This is what Paul was referring to in the passage from 1 Corinthians: "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."

This is a reminder to us to know the areas where we are weak, therefore, we ask God not to expose us to temptation that is too great for us to cope with. It is wise to know those areas. Every Tuesday I meet with a group of men who are not afraid to share their weaknesses and to ask others to pray for them. The men I am concerned for are those who say, "Oh, that's no problem for me. I can handle that." Those are the ones who get blind-sided by Satan. Remember the Scripture that says: "Let him who thinks he stands, take heed, lest he fall." Where? Why, in the very area you think you are the strongest, you are most vulnerable.

These three requests which Jesus models are beautifully comprehensive. They cover all our human needs: material (daily bread), spiritual (forgiveness of sins), and moral (deliverance from evil). When we pray this prayer we are expressing our dependence upon God for every area of life.

The Lord's Prayer is our model of Christian prayer. It is thoughtful, it is God-centered, and it is based on a correct

view of God. He is our Abba Father in the heavens. We need to remind ourselves that he loves us with the most tender affection; that he sees his children even in the secret place; that he knows all our needs before we ask him; and that he acts on our behalf by his heavenly and kingly power.

Let me close with a story that illustrates for me what Jesus is saying. Two of my sons play Pop Warner football. There are strict weight guidelines in all the divisions, and yesterday was the day when all of the players from the Peninsula are weighed and certified so they can play. It is a very big day for some of the boys who are close to the limit. Already they had been practicing for a month.

As the players on my youngest son's team came out of the gym, there was a lot of cheering and congratulating going on. I noticed that one of the boys on my son's team did not come out with the others. When at last he emerged, he was crying. A month ago, he was sixteen pounds over the weight limit. He worked very hard all month to lose the weight, and he thought he had done so, but he lost only fourteen pounds; he was two pounds overweight. As I saw him come out I wondered where his parents were. I thought, "Now is when a boy needs a dad. He needs someone to hug him, someone to tell him everything is going to be all right." But there was no dad to console him, no parents in sight. Although I didn't know him, I went over to him and hugged him and held him for a few moments.

As I thought about that, I realized that is where we all find ourselves. Morally speaking, we have all missed the mark. Despite our best efforts, we have failed. We didn't make the grade. We didn't make the right choices. We didn't make the team. But then we found that God was waiting for us, his arms outstretched to enfold us and say, it's all right. He has paid the price. He has cleansed us.

That is the God we worship. He is our Daddy, our Abba Father. He wants us to come to him, sit in his lap and tell him we love him and want him to have his way in our lives, to tell him our needs. It is there we will find love and forgiveness, and everything we need.

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I am indebted to John R.W. Stott for his excellent book, *The Sermon on the Mount*. I have borrowed extensively from his lecture series.



# SECURE INVESTMENTS

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Catalog No. 1096

Matthew 6:19-24

18th Message

Gary Vanderet

August 31st, 1997

Last evening we heard the tragic news that Princess Diana had been killed in an automobile accident. Our prayers go out to her children and family as they deal with this terrible tragedy.

I could not help but wonder if she was ready to die. Incidents like this make us ask the questions that we all must be able to answer, things like: Who am? How did I get here? What matters to me? Is someone keeping score? What does He expect from me? Is there life after death? How do I achieve eternal life, if there is such a thing? What is the meaning of death? Everyone, whether they be atheist, Muslim, Buddhist, Jew, New Ager, agnostic, or Christian must confront these questions.

The death of loved ones or people we admire has a sobering effect on us. It makes us think of our own mortality. The Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes says that there is more reality at a funeral than there is at a party. At funerals, people have to face facts; they have to look at things the way they really are. Though I cannot say that I enjoy funerals (no one does), I must admit that the overall effect of a funeral is positive, because people have to face reality. It is one of the brutal facts of life that you spend your life building something—your portfolio, your firm, your body, your reputation—and then you die.

In light of our own mortality, there is another question we need to ask ourselves: What goals are worthy of the investment of our life? That is the very question that Jesus will answer in our passage from the Sermon on the Mount this morning. How do we make that choice?

When it comes to purpose and goals, most people are motivated primarily by the pursuit of money and the things that money can buy. Worldly ambition has a strong fascination for us. The spell of materialism is hard to break. In this section from the gospel of Matthew, Jesus is trying to help us choose well. Let me set your minds at ease here. This is a sensitive issue. I want to say that I do not desire your money. We are all fascinated by materialism. But here, Jesus points out the folly of the wrong way of living and the wisdom of the right way. Just as he did when he talked about piety and prayer, here he does so with regard to ambition. He sets the false and the true over against each other in such a way as to invite us to compare them and see for ourselves.

We pick up Jesus' words in Matthew 6:19:

**"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth,**

**where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Matt 6:19-21, NASB)**

It is important to understand what Jesus is prohibiting when he says "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth." Perhaps it would be helpful to begin by talking about what he is not saying. Jesus is not banning possessions or condemning wealth; nor is he saying we should not save for a rainy day. Storing up and stewardship are commended in the Bible. In fact, the Scripture praises the ant for storing in summer the food it will need when winter comes. The New Testament says that the believer who makes no provision for his family is worse than an unbeliever. Let me also say that we are not to despise the good things that our Creator has given us richly to enjoy. Let us enjoy them!

The warning here is not against being provident but against being covetous. It is against the selfish accumulation of things, the foolish fantasy that says a person's life consists in the abundance of his possessions, the materialism that seems to glue our hearts to the earth, the philosophy that says "he who dies with the most toys wins!"

Jesus directs our attention to the comparative durability of two different kinds of treasures. He tells us, first, that earthly possessions are temporal, and therefore not a good investment. The earthly possessions we covet, Jesus reminds us, grow rusty and moth-eaten, and thieves break in and steal them. The word for rust actually means "eating." It could refer to the corrosion caused by rust, but equally it could refer to any devouring pest or bug. In those days, moths would get into people's clothes; rats and mice would eat stored grain; worms would take whatever they put underground, and thieves would break into their homes and steal their belongings. Not much has changed! Have moths ever eaten holes in your clothes? Has anything of yours ever rusted? Have you ever had anything stolen?

What Jesus is saying is that everyone, men and women, young and old, is in the junk business! Every single thing you own—your car, your home, your computer, your boat, your video games—is in the process of passing away. Give it enough time and it will be junk.

Jesus is not imposing a prohibition on things, he is warning against the love of things. It is not money, but,



as Paul says, the love of money that is a “root of all kinds of evil.” Jesus forbids us from making mere things our treasure, storing them up as if they had ultimate importance. The Book of Ecclesiastes calls all possessions “vanity.” That is not to mean that everything is equally useless or silly; it means that possessions are transient; they are vanity in that they don’t endure; they are cursed with temporality.

So these “treasures on earth” to which Jesus is referring include any valuable which is perishable or which can be lost in one way or another. Money and the things that money buys don’t last. Paul says we should not put our hope in “uncertain riches.” In fact, we spend so much time trying to shelter our money, we can’t enjoy it for fear we are going to lose it. And even if our money doesn’t go, sooner or later we do, and we can’t take it with us.

When I was younger I used to watch the Jack Benny show. I remember a dialogue that used to take place between Jack and his servant Rochester. Jack had a vault where he kept all his money. He would open the vault (you couldn’t see it, but you could hear dozens of locks being opened and chains rattling), and Rochester would yell: “But Mr. Benny, you can’t take it with you!” Jack would yell back: “Then I’m not going!” But he was wrong, of course. We are all going. And the hearse will not be pulling any U-Haul trailers. We leave it all behind for someone else.

That is why we should not be so concerned with earthly treasures—because they are all passing away. They are not a good investment. Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, because everything you invest there is permanent. That is the second point Jesus makes. And that is why he says that where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. Jesus is saying that unless we can distinguish between the permanent and the perishable, we are in deep trouble.

But, he says, treasure in heaven is incorruptible. What is this treasure? Jesus does not say. Yet surely we may surmise that to lay up treasure in heaven is to do anything on earth, the effects of which last for eternity. One practical way that we lay up treasure in heaven is to invest in the lives of people. We need to stop loving things and using people and begin using our things to love people. In a society that is shot through with materialism, the ultimate question we must ask is: What are we doing with what God gave us? In terms of our eternal portfolio, what are we doing?

There are so many ways we can love people. It’s not a matter of being rich or poor. Many poor people are very materialistic; many rich people have great concern for the poor. We can use the things that we have to love people. We can send a card of appreciation to someone who is down and needs a lift, visit a lonely shut-in, baby-sit for a hassled mother who needs a few hours off, or call someone on the phone to show that we care. We may not remember doing these things, but the peo-

ple we do them for often remember—and Jesus never forgets.

For a number of years, my son Joel has gone to Mexico one week each spring as part of our high school ministry. A few days ago he received a letter from a friend he made there. I would like to read a portion of the letter, because it really touched me. Here is what this young man wrote:

I want to let you know how much I miss you. I still have your picture and I look at it once in a while. I bet you look very different now. If you still have mine, you can bet I look different, because I am a totally new person. I’ll never forget the days when you were here and we were talking in the back of the church. I can remember many things, but I remember one especially. Some people accept Jesus after they listen to a verse from the Bible and it gets into their hearts and they remember it forever. But in my case it was different. In my case, I remember a phrase that you mentioned. You said to me: “If one day I go to heaven and I don’t see you there, I’m going to feel really bad.” And I believed you. That day, before going to bed, I prayed like I never did before. I asked Jesus to come into my heart, and he did. I’m very thankful to God for putting you in my way. I know that maybe the others have already told you this, because they heard my testimony, but I just had to let you know myself, and tell you this again from the bottom of my heart. Thank you, my friend, for what you did. I will never forget it.

All these things are temporal activities that have eternal consequences. When you go to work tomorrow, it’s not just to earn money to pay for your living expenses, it’s because God has put you there to love people. That is why you live in your neighborhood, so you can use your things to love people, because people, not things, are what will last forever.

This then is “treasure in heaven.” No burglar can steal this and no bug can destroy it for there are neither moths nor mice nor marauders in heaven. That is why treasure in heaven is secure. Precautionary measures to protect it are unnecessary. It needs no insurance cover. It is indestructible. What Jesus seems to be saying is: “If it’s a safe investment you’re after, nothing could be safer than this.”

But Jesus’ concern for our money runs far deeper than the danger of losing it all in the end. He is more interested in what money does to our hearts right now, because materialism affects our hearts by impairing our ability to “see.” Verses 22-23:

**“The lamp of the body is the eye; if therefore your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!” (6:22-23)**

The eye is the lamp of the body. Almost everything the body does, our ability to run, jump, drive a car,

cross a road, cook, embroider, paint, depends on our ability to see. The eye illumines, as it were, what the body does through its hands and feet. It is true that blind people often can cope wonderfully by developing their other faculties to compensate for their lack of sight, yet the principle holds true: a sighted person walks in the light, while a blind person is in darkness. The great difference between the light and the darkness of the body is due to this small but intricate organ, the eye. "If therefore your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light."

"But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness." Here Jesus is speaking metaphorically. Often in Scripture the eye is equivalent to the heart, i.e., to "set the heart" and to "fix the eye" on something are synonyms. Jesus does the same thing here, going from the importance of having our heart in the right place (21) to the importance of having our eyes healthy.

The point Jesus is making is that just as our eye affects our whole body, so our ambition (where we fix our eyes and heart) affects our whole life. Just as a seeing eye gives light to the body, so a single-minded ambition to serve God and love others adds meaning to our life and throws light on everything we do. Likewise, a life of selfish ambition (laying up treasures on earth) plunges us into moral darkness. It makes us intolerant, inhuman and ruthless, depriving life of all ultimate significance.

If our gaze is fixed on material things, then our hearts will go bad. The love of money draws our hearts away from good. We become confused and uncertain. Our judgment becomes clouded and we begin to make bad decisions that defy our own values. The apostle Paul warns in 1 Timothy that people who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money, he says, is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

Ultimately, money draws our hearts away not only from good, but from God, Jesus says. Verse 24:

**"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. (6:24)**

Jesus now explains that behind the choice between two treasures (where we lay them up) and two visions (where we fix our eyes) lies the still more basic choice, the choice between two masters (whom we are going to serve). It is a choice between God and mammon ("mammon" is a transliteration of an Aramaic word for wealth), a choice between the living Creator himself and any object of our own creation, for we cannot serve both.

Most would say that statement sounds a bit extreme. Many Christians, though we wouldn't admit it,

disagree with it. We think it's perfectly possible to love both God and money. But we need to remember that when Jesus refers to "masters," he doesn't mean a 20th century employer; he is talking about a slave owner. It may be possible to work for two employers, but a slave cannot be the property of two owners. Full-time service is the essence of slavery.

Jesus is reminding us that we all must serve somebody—and there can be only one master. The one whom we want to serve most will be revealed. So people who divide their allegiance between God and mammon have already given their allegiance to money, since God can be served only with an entire and exclusive devotion. This is simply because he is God:

John Stott writes: "Seen for what it is, this is a choice between Creator and creature, between the glorious personal God and money, between worship and idolatry. It seems inconceivable that anybody could make the wrong choice. For now it is a question not just of comparative durability and comparative benefit, but of comparative worth: the intrinsic worth of the One and the intrinsic worthlessness of the other." But we all make the wrong choice at times. We are preoccupied with things, and it is very difficult if not impossible to change. The only way to rid ourselves of those things is to see the incomprehensible worth of the other: to let God love you, to focus your gaze on him, to devote your time to knowing him, serving him and loving him. That is the only investment that is secure, and the only way to loosen your grip on unimportant things.

We cannot serve two masters. We can have only center at a time. If money and things fascinate us, then we will lose our fascination with God.

How can we rid ourselves of our affection for and preoccupation with things other than God? The answer is, in devotion to him, worship of him and service for him. Change the focus from treasures on earth to treasures in heaven. As you do it will loosen your grip on lesser things and begin to set your affection on things above. Worshipping money limits our love for God. Worshipping God loosens money's grip on us. Everything we own is either a tool or an idol. It is either something we worship or something we use for the greater glory of our God.

The bottom line of all investment is return. If we invest solely in things on the earth, we will lose them all. But if we invest ourselves in knowing God, in loving him and serving others on his behalf, that is an investment that is truly secure.

In the gospel of John, Jesus says there are only two kinds of bread: that which lasts and that which doesn't. He concludes that it is far better to work for the bread that endures. The problem with most of us, however, is that we are working for the kind of bread that doesn't last, mere bread that temporarily fills us but eventually leaves us unsatisfied again. The problem, Jesus says, is not that we work for bread (we all have to earn a living

in order to eat). The problem is that bread doesn't last very long, and in the end it doesn't satisfy, so it is a bad investment.

Jesus' words reveal a major flaw in our lifestyles. Many of us spend all our energies working for mere bread only to find that it doesn't satisfy. When we are young, all we can think about is getting a hot car or building a strong and healthy body. As we get older we strive to become economically sufficient, to live in that perfect house or acquire some other commodity that will make life more satisfying.

Jesus challenges that philosophy. His word makes us ask ourselves: What are we working for? Is everything we do merely preparation for the weekend? But it is a very unwise investment to put all our energies into what will not pay off. Why are you going back to work tomorrow? Is it merely to earn a living, pay the mortgage, or buy a new car? If that is our ambition, we will miss out on the richness that God intends for us. There are people at your workplace who need you. Let us begin to use our things to love people instead of using people to love things.

Jim Elliot, the missionary who died at the hands of the Auca Indians, penned these words which echo the point that Jesus is making: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

One by one God took them from me,  
All the things I valued most,  
Till I was empty handed;  
Every glittering toy was lost.

And I walked earth's highway, grieving,  
In my rags and poverty,  
Till I heard His voice inviting,  
"Lift your empty hands to Me!"

So I turned my hands toward heaven,  
And he filled them with a store  
Of His own transcendent riches,  
Till they could contain no more.

And at last I comprehended  
With my stupid mind and dull,  
That God could not pour His riches  
Into hands already full!

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# A PRESCRIPTION FOR ANXIETY

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Catalog No. 1097

Matthew 6:25-34

19th Message

Gary Vanderet

September 7th, 1997

Recently I came across the following true story. Robert Ringer writes:

In my early 20's I had the good fortune to be introduced to a wealthy old Wall Streeter. Wall Streeter is used here of an investor who spends each day watching the ticker tape and maneuvering money in and out of stocks at hopefully opportune moments. Harold Hart epitomized a typical Wall Street success story. Struggling as a youngster, he was now a millionaire many times over. He had it all.

The biggie came one evening when I came to visit Mr. Hart to do a deal. When I arrived, I found him resting tranquilly in his favorite chair, with servants waiting on him hand and foot. I sat there awhile waiting as he stared blankly into space. Finally, he muttered, "You know, nature has played a great hoax on man. You work all your life, go through an endless amount of struggles, play all the petty little games, and if you're lucky, you finally make it to the top. Well, I made it to the top and you know what? It doesn't mean a thing. I tell you, nature has made a fool of man and the biggest fool of all is me. Here I sit, in poor health, exhausted from years of playing the game, well aware that time is running out, and I keep asking myself, 'Now what, genius? What's your next brilliant move going to be?' All that time I spent worrying, maneuvering—it was meaningless. Life is nothing but a big hoax. We think we're so important, but the truth is, we're nothing."

That is an honest expression of despair from an unbeliever whose life did not add up.

Ron Ritchie once shared a story about a funeral he conducted for a young man who rode with a motorcycle gang in San Francisco. The man had grown up in Mexico among the Tarahumara Indians and he never adjusted to life in the United States. One night he was killed in a street fight. The funeral was held in the Santa Cruz mountains, and the service was filled with bikers. Ron said that afterwards, one man said to him: "I got a put, a pad, and an old lady, but I ain't got no peace." His words speak for many people who, as Thoreau put it, "live lives of quiet desperation."

Jesus gives an answer for that kind of life in the passage we will look at this morning from his Sermon on the Mount. If you are living a life of quiet desperation today, I pray that the words of our Lord will speak to your heart. Jesus knew that all human beings are seekers. We all need something to live for, something to

give meaning to our existence, something on which to set our hearts and minds.

In that sense we are all ambitious. Ambition is what makes us tick. It reveals the mainspring of our actions, our inner motivation. Yet many people do not understand that no matter what we achieve or acquire, we always have that thirst for something more. The Rolling Stones said it in a song: "I can't get no satisfaction." We have that thirst because the thing we are searching for is in reality nothing more or less than God. Our seeking is a stirring of absolute need: our need for God. As Augustine discovered, having searched almost forever for satisfaction in this world: "O God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you."

That is what Jesus is saying in the sixth chapter of the gospel of Matthew.

We need to understand the connection between the passage we will be looking at today and the one preceding it, which we looked at last week. Too often this passage is read on its own, isolated from what has gone before. If we do this, we will miss the significance of the introductory, "Therefore I tell you." In Bible study, when you see a "therefore," you should always ask what is it there for!

Jesus is saying that because transient, earthly treasures do not satisfy, a choice must be made between God and money. The Kingdom of God demands unswerving allegiance to its values, therefore do not worry, do not be anxiously consumed with material things.

Anxiety is Jesus' concern in this paragraph. Three times he repeats the prohibition, "do not be anxious" or "do not worry" (verses 25, 31, 34). And the anxious preoccupation he forbids concerns food, drink and clothing: What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we wear? This is the world's trinity of cares.

It will be helpful to clarify what Jesus is prohibiting. He is not forbidding thought. He even encourages reflection by telling us to look at the birds and the flowers and think about how God looks after them. Neither is he forbidding forethought. We mentioned last week that Scripture commends the ant. Birds also make provision for the future. They build nests, incubate their eggs and feed their young; some birds even store food. So there is nothing in Jesus' words to discourage Christians from making plans for the future or taking sensible steps for their own security.

John Stott concludes: "No, what Jesus forbids is neither thought nor forethought, but anxious thought. It is the same word used of Martha, who was 'distracted' (anxious) with much serving; of the good seed sown among thorns which was choked by the 'cares' (the anxiety) of life; and by Paul in his injunction, 'Have no anxiety about any thing.' As Bishop Ryle expressed it: 'Prudent provision for the future is right; wearing, corroding, self-tormenting anxiety is wrong.'"

Jesus gives several reasons in this passage why worry is incompatible with the Christian life. I will point out three:

First, it is unworthy.

Matthew 6, verses 25-26

**"For this reason I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns, and {yet} your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? (Matt 6:25-26, NASB)**

John Stott summarizes this well: "Worry betrays a false view of human beings. It is as if we were merely bodies that needed to be fed, watered, clothed and housed. It is as if human life were merely a physiological mechanism needing to be protected, lubricated and fueled. An exclusive preoccupation with food, drink and clothing could be justified only if physical survival were the be-all and end-all of existence. Then sustaining the body would be our proper first concern." That is why it is understandable that in emergency famine conditions the battle to survive must take priority over other things. But in ordinary circumstances for this to be so downgrades man to the level of animals, birds and plants.

And yet the majority of advertisements in today's newspaper and on television are directed toward the body: how to feed it, clothe it, warm it, cool it, refresh it, relax it, entertain it, titillate it. This preoccupation prompts these questions: Is physical well being a worthy object to which to devote our lives? Has human life no more significance than this?

Worry denies your worth.

Jesus says, look at the birds. The birds are always taken care of by almighty God. "Are not you of greater worth than they?" asks Jesus. The question demands an affirmative answer. Aren't you worth more? Absolutely! And if God takes care of the birds, then he will certainly take care of you, because you are much more important to him than they. Jesus died for you. He did not die for the birds. But he cares for them, and he cares for you.

Worry makes us focus on the lesser things in life, things like food and clothing. But the God who gives us

life will certainly give us all the essentials for that life. Jesus' argument is from the greater to the lesser. If God gives you his Son, his greatest possession, will he not give you also all of your needs?

Secondly, worry is unproductive.

Verse 27:

**"And which of you by being anxious can add a single cubit to his life's span? (6:27)**

The last word of Jesus' question could be translated either "span of life" (RSV) or "stature" (AV). It can mean either. To add a "cubit" (a little more than a foot) to one's height would be a remarkable feat indeed, although God does it for all of us between childhood and adulthood. However, the question is more likely: "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?" The answer is, no one. In fact, not only can you not add to your life, by worrying you can subtract from it. Stress, worrying about things that need not be worried about, is killing many today.

Jesus goes on say, in verse 34, not to worry about tomorrow. And all worry is about tomorrow, whether it concerns food or clothing or whatever. But all worry is experienced today. Whenever we are anxious we are upset in the present about some event which may happen in the future. However, these fears about tomorrow, which we experience so acutely today, may not be fulfilled. The advice we sometimes give, "Don't worry, it may never happen," is not very sympathetic, but it's true. We worry that we may not pass an exam or find a job or get married or stay healthy or succeed in some endeavor. But it is all fantasy. Many worries, perhaps most, never materialize.

So worry is not productive. In fact, it's a waste—a waste of time, thought and nervous energy. Jesus says in verse 34 that he wants us to live a day at a time. We should plan for the future, of course, but not worry about the future. "One day's trouble is enough for one day." "Each day has troubles enough of its own." So why anticipate them? If we do, we double them. For if our fear does not materialize, we have worried once for nothing; if it does materialize, we have worried twice instead of once. In both cases it is foolish: worry doubles trouble.

Worry is unworthy and unproductive.

And third, it is unnecessary.

Verses 28-32:

**"And why are you anxious about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory did not clothe himself like one of these. But if God so arrays the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more do so for you, O men of little faith? Do not be anxious then, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'With**

**what shall we clothe ourselves?" For all these things the Gentiles eagerly seek; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. (6:28-32)**

Worry ignores God's understanding of and his supply of our needs. Here Jesus continues his "how much more" line of argument. First, he used birds as an illustration of God's supply of food; here he uses flowers to illustrate God's supply of clothing. In both cases Jesus tells us to "look at" or "consider" them, that is, to think about the fact of God's care for them.

If you take an interest in birds and flowers, you know that although birds neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, yet our heavenly Father feeds them; and that although the lilies of the field (all the beautiful spring flowers of Galilee) neither toil nor spin, yet our heavenly Father clothes them, indeed more gorgeously than Solomon in all his glory.

If that is so, can we not trust God to feed and clothe us who are of much more value than birds and flowers? Why, he even clothes the common grass, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven! As Charles Spurgeon said: "Lovely lilies, how you rebuke our foolish nervousness!"

Someone has written,

Said the robin to the sparrow:  
'I should really like to know  
Why these anxious human beings  
Rush about and worry so.'

Said the sparrow to the robin:  
'Friend, I think that it must be  
That they have no heavenly Father,  
Such as cares for you and me.'

That is a nice sentiment, but it's not completely accurate. Jesus did not say that birds have a heavenly Father, but rather that we have; and that if the Creator cares for his creatures, we may be even more sure that the Father will look after his children.

So becoming preoccupied with material things in such a way that they engross our attention, absorb our energy and burden us with anxiety is incompatible with our Christian faith. It's unworthy, unproductive, and unnecessary. It is distrustful of our heavenly Father. It is very foolish. This is what unbelievers do. It is idolatry. We become enslaved to things designed to serve us. Our neighbors are consumed by their interests, their goods and getting ahead, but none of these things can satisfy the human heart. Eternity is written in the heart. We are spiritual beings, made in God's image.

Jesus calls us to a higher ambition. We must have something else, something higher as the one thing which we will energetically seek. Jesus identifies this in verse 33:

**"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you." (6:33)**

Jesus put it this way in the gospel of John:

**"Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man shall give to you, for on Him the Father, even God, has set His seal."**

In scripture, our ambitions are often described as a hunger. It is helpful to ask ourselves from time to time, "What do I hunger for?" Is it power or more money or a better house or nicer clothes or a bigger car? A better husband or wife, perhaps. We all hunger for something.

But we know that if our hungers are misdirected, then we are never satisfied. There is nothing that can satisfy us if we hunger for the wrong things. We just want more of the same. But Jesus says here that if we hunger and thirst after righteousness, then we shall be filled.

Last week I said that there are only two kinds of bread in the world, that which lasts and that which doesn't. According to Jesus, it is far better to work for the bread that endures. The problem with most of us, however, is that we are working for the kind which doesn't last, mere bread which temporarily fills us but eventually leaves us unsatisfied again. The problem, Jesus says, is not that we work for bread, because we have to earn a living in order to eat. The problem is that bread doesn't last very long, and in the end does not satisfy, so it is a bad investment.

Many people today think the most important things in life are to be healthy, strong and economically sufficient. That is what life is about, and that is why we work. I hope we know better than to pass this on to our children. The philosophy of many (including some Christians) is described in this little poem:

Into this world to eat and to sleep,  
And to know no reason why he was born,  
Save to consume the corn,  
Devour the cattle, flock and fish,  
And leave behind an empty dish.

It is an unworthy objective to be consumed by things that do not satisfy.

As we celebrate the Lord's Table, the bread reminds us that Jesus is our life. "I am the bread of life," he said. "Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness and they died, but I am the true bread out of heaven." That bread is the only thing that can satisfy us. Unlike the many things in life that leave us feeling empty, Jesus will never disappoint us. As we partake of this bread we are reminded that he is our sustenance, he is our life.

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# DEALING WITH A CRITICAL SPIRIT

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Catalog No. 1098

Matthew 7:1-6

20th Message

Gary Vanderet

September 14th, 1997

The Scriptures present a very reasoned argument. They are not just a collection of sayings. In Bible study, it is wise to look for repeated themes and phrases. "Righteousness" is a word that Jesus repeatedly uses in the Sermon on the Mount. What it actually means is, to conform to a standard. In that sense, a watch that keeps the exact time could be said to be a "righteous" watch. Christian righteousness, according to Jesus, is conforming to a certain standard, and that standard is the character of God as it is revealed in the Scriptures.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day had a very wrong standard, however. The Pharisees were more concerned with outward conformity to the law than inner righteousness of spirit. The purpose of the Scriptures, according to Jesus, is to produce in us a love for other people. That is the mark of citizens of the kingdom of God. If we don't love people, then we don't understand the Scriptures, we have missed the entire point. Paul defines it this way in 1 Timothy: "The goal of our instruction is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." Bible study ought to make us more loving, not smarter or better able to discern what is going to happen next. It is not designed to get our theology correct, although theology is important. The purpose of all Bible study is to know God and become conformed to the image of his Son. As the hymn puts it, "beyond the sacred page we see you, Lord."

Some Christians, however, seem to try too hard to be good. They seem upright, but they're uptight. For them, goodness is a stern, demanding business. They're chaste, honest, respectable, Bible toting, church going, hymn singing people, but everything seems out of phase. As William James put it: "Their faith exists as a dull habit." They have the appearance of righteousness, with its self imposed worship, obvious humility, and harsh treatment of the body, but they lack genuine love that springs from having contact with God. True goodness is not found in doing extraordinary things, but in doing ordinary things in an extraordinary way. It is not so much outward religious behavior as it is having a gracious, winsome spirit in everything we do.

So we come to Jesus' words once more in the Sermon on the Mount. In the opening verses of Matthew chapter 7, he issues a warning. Verse 1:

**"Do not judge lest you be judged. (Matt 7:1, NASB)**

Don't criticize others, says Jesus, don't judge them. Don't impose your standard of righteousness on others. The standard is meant for us. If we are going to sit in judgment on anyone, we should do so with regard to ourselves. We must bring our own life into alignment with God's standard. It's not our job to shape people up. As C. S. Lewis put it: "There is really one difficult person in the world for whom you are responsible." Ruth Graham said of her husband: "It's my job to love Billy; it's God's job to make him good."

But we love to try and shape up others, don't we? Before you married your spouse you knew he or she had some weaknesses, some rough edges, but you thought that in time you could shape them up and get them house-trained. But you have discovered to your chagrin that they didn't cooperate. They don't appreciate your advice on how to run a business, how to make a budget or how to organize your sock drawer. Jesus says that is not where you begin or where your primary focus should be.

Now Jesus is not forbidding human institutions of justice or law courts. And he is not suggesting we suspend our critical faculties in relation to other people, pretending not to notice their faults, refraining from all criticism and refusing to discern between truth and error, goodness and evil. That would be hypocritical, and it would contradict much of his teaching in other places.

Jesus is not forbidding all criticism, either. We are still to be critics in the sense of being discerning. When Jesus tells us not to judge, he isn't referring to assessing people critically, but rather, judging them harshly. He is referring to our tendency to be fault-finders, to be negative and destructive towards other people, to enjoy actively seeking out their weaknesses, always assuming the worst about their motives, pouring cold water on their ideas and being ungenerous toward their mistakes.

There are two principles which will help us with our critical attitudes, with our condemning, censorious manner. The first is the principle of reciprocity. To put it simply, we get back what we give. That seems to be a principle that pertains to all of life, and that is what Jesus means when he says (verse 2):

**"For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. (7:2)**

Jesus is not referring to the time when we will stand before the judgment seat of Christ. In the parallel passage in Luke 6, our Lord applies this principle to others, saying that in general, the way we treat people is how they will treat us. There are certainly exceptions to that, but the principle stands: if we are intolerable, judgmental and critical, then people will be inclined to treat us the same way; if we are tolerant and gracious, people will respond in kind.

After David sinned with Bathsheba, Nathan brought a case to him for judgment. The issue concerned a rich man with many sheep who stole the only ewe lamb of a poor man. David was very angry, and his judgment against the thief was harsh: "As the Lord lives, surely the man who has done this deserves to die." Then Nathan said: "You are the man!" David's angry judgment blew up in his face. There is a deadly reciprocity awaiting us when we judge others, because our judgment inevitably comes home to visit us.

This often happens because we typically judge others in areas where we ourselves are weakest but we are in denial of that weakness. I find myself becoming very harsh at times with men who struggle with being over-controllers—which is one of my problems. This principle of reciprocity is one of God's ingenious ways of dealing with our double standards. We are hard on other people morally, but lenient on ourselves. We say our lies are only exaggerations to emphasize a point, but we are indignant and unforgiving when someone lies to us, and we call into question the integrity of every area of their life. But Jesus' warning is to be careful when we sit in the judge's chair, because we will actually find ourselves in the chair of the condemned.

One of the great ironies of life is that most people are critical because they lack a sense of worth. We want to be accepted and approved, so we criticize other people because that makes us feel better about ourselves. When I was a high school pastor, I had to take a student aside on occasion to tell him that his prayer request was inappropriate, because now, everyone had a lesser view of the person in question. Criticism is often cloaked in a helpful way, which is why Jesus calls it hypocrisy. An apparent act of kindness (taking a speck of dirt from someone's eye) becomes the means of inflating our own ego. This was what the Pharisees did, and Jesus addressed this kind of perversity in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. As A.B. Bruce writes, their ability to exalt themselves by disparaging others was "a cheap way of attaining moral superiority."

But it always backfires, because people don't appreciate it. We find that we are less accepted and less liked—and people tend to be more critical of us, so we start feeling worse about ourselves. Jesus says, do not start by applying truth to everyone else's life, because it backfires, and we are the ones who suffer the most.

In the parable, the Pharisee made a detestable and in-

accurate comparison, magnifying both his own virtue and the tax collector's wickedness. When we act this way we set ourselves up as an examiner, a judge, claiming competence to sit in judgment upon our fellow men. But there is only One who is competent for that job, and we are not him, we are not God. No human being is qualified to be the judge of his fellow humans, for we cannot read each other's hearts or assess each other's motives.

When we judge someone, we are playing God. In order to judge justly, we would need to know everything about the person, not only their external circumstances but also their inner thoughts and motives, and that is impossible. We cannot be sure of our own motives; how can we presume to judge someone else's?

So the command not to judge is, as John Stott writes, "not an order to be blind, but a plea to be generous. Jesus is not saying we should cease to be men (by suspending our critical powers, which help to distinguish us from animals), but to renounce the presumptuous ambition to be God (by setting ourselves up as judges)."

The Bible does speak of an act of judgment that is redemptive and should be carried out. Paul says in Galatians: "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted." That isn't a judgment that condemns, but rather a word that is designed to save. It's a rescue operation. If we see a believer violating a clear command of Scripture, we should reach out to help him in a spirit of love and humility. That's love in action. Redemptive judgment is based on actions, not motives, and violation of Scripture, not merely conscience; it is designed to restore and rebuild someone in an atmosphere of acceptance and empathy. What a far cry this is from the critical, faultfinding attitude that Jesus is addressing.

However, before that happens, Jesus says there is another important principle to remember, the principle of priority. The Scriptures are to be applied, but God wants us to begin with ourselves. Our Lord makes use of a helpful and familiar illustration. This is a figure of speech, hyperbole, an exaggeration for the sake of emphasis. Verse 3:

**"And why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. (7:3-5)**

Here Jesus relates his famous little parable about "foreign bodies" in people's eyes, specks of sawdust on the one hand and logs or beams on the other. (James Moffatt refers to these as the "splinter" and the

“plank.”) Earlier, Jesus had exposed hypocrisy in relation to God (practicing piety before men to be seen by them); now he exposes hypocrisy in relation to others, namely, meddling with their petty mistakes while failing to deal with our own major faults.

Jesus asks how we can see the speck in our brother’s eye when we have a log sticking out of our own? Imagine how silly this scene would be—trying to help someone remove a speck from his eye, with a piece of two by four projecting from our own eye! We might be trying to help, but it would be quite evident that we needed help ourselves. How ludicrous! This is the point Jesus is making. The picture of someone struggling in the delicate operation of removing a speck of dirt from a friend’s eye while a plank in his own eye entirely obscures his vision, is ridiculous in the extreme.

The point is clear. We have a fatal tendency to exaggerate the faults of others and minimize the seriousness of our own. We have a rosy view of ourselves and a jaundiced view of others. Indeed, what we are often doing is seeing our own faults in others and judging them vicariously. When we do this we experience the pleasure of self-righteousness without the pain of penitence.

Jesus gives the cure for this, in verse 5:

**“You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye. (7:5)**

Some people would conclude from this parable that Jesus was telling us to mind our own business. But he is saying that if we deal with our own eye problems, then we will be able to see clearly enough to help someone else. It might be a good idea to highlight in your Bible that word “first”: “first take the log out of your own eye . . .” If we did this in our homes, if we first took the log out of our own eye rather than pointing out over and over again the problems we see in our spouses, that would work wonders for our communication.

Jesus’ standard for relationships in his kingdom is high and healthy. As John Stott writes: “In all our attitudes and behavior towards others we are to play neither the judge (becoming harsh, censorious and condemning), nor the hypocrite (blaming others while excusing ourselves), but the brother, caring for others so much that we first blame and correct ourselves and then seek to be constructive in the help we give them.”

We need to be as critical of ourselves as we often are of others, and as generous to others as we always are to ourselves.

There is a balance to this, however. Verse 6:

**“Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces. (7:6)**

If we are not to be judges, neither are we to be naive and simple. Not everyone is grateful for criticism and correction. According to the book of Proverbs, this is one of the obvious distinctions between a wise man and a fool: “Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you.” The dogs referred to here are not like the pets we own, but rather the wild pariah dogs, the mongrels which scavenged in the city’s rubbish dumps. And pigs were unclean animals to the Jew.

Jesus recognizes that we do have to make judgments. We are to be critical, analytical and thoughtful in our dealings with others. Our Lord doesn’t want us to be naive. On another occasion he said we are to be “wise as serpents.” So when he tells us not to judge, he is not encouraging us to be naive and unthinking. We have to make judgments.

But there are some people who are beyond our help. We may want to lovingly and gently take the speck out of their eye, but they don’t want it out. They don’t want help. They don’t want truth. What they want is to live under the cover of darkness. That is why Jesus says do not take the precious things of God, like pearls, and throw them to an animal which will trample them under foot. Behind our Lord’s words is the intimation that truth unheeded tends to brutalize people. God withdraws light from those who don’t want it, because truth unheeded tends to make people more inhumane, more animalistic, more brutal. Therefore, as an act of love, Christians should not force people to face the truth when they don’t want it. Jesus is saying that if we attempt to take the speck out of someone’s eye, and they indicate a disrespect for spiritual things, a disregard for holy things, we should not force the matter. He is not talking about non-Christians in general, but those who spurn truth, those who have no use for it and ridicule it.

I would like to close by sharing the true story about a young man named Teddy Stallard. Teddy by his own admission was an unattractive, unmotivated little boy. He was difficult to like, especially for a school teacher who all day long faced his deadpan, expressionless, unfocused stare. Although his fifth grade teacher said she loved all her students, Miss Thompson had to admit that deep down she wasn’t being honest. She didn’t like Teddy. She judged him. She even received a certain perverse pleasure in marking his papers with red ink and writing the F’s with a flair. Her view of him was already distorted by her perspective, but she should have known better. As his teacher, she had his records, and she knew more about him than she wanted to admit:

First Grade: Teddy shows promise with his work and attitude, but he has a poor home situation.

Second Grade: Teddy could do better. Mother is seriously ill. He receives little help at home.

Third Grade: Teddy is a good boy, but too serious.

He is a slow learner. His mother died this year.

Fourth Grade: Teddy is very slow, but well behaved. His father shows no interest.

At Christmas, Miss Thompson's class all brought her presents in pretty wrappings, and gathered round to watch her open them. She was surprised when she received a gift from Teddy. It was crudely wrapped in brown paper, loosely held together with tape. When she opened it, out fell a gaudy rhinestone bracelet with half the stones missing, and a bottle of cheap perfume. The children began to giggle, but she had enough sense to put on the bracelet and apply some of the perfume on her wrist. She asked the class, "Doesn't it smell lovely?"

When school was over and the children had left, Teddy lingered behind. He slowly came over to her desk and said softly, "Miss Thompson, you smell just like my mother. And her bracelet looks real pretty on you, too. I'm glad you liked my presents." When Teddy left, Miss Thompson got down on her knees and asked God to forgive her.

The next day when the children came to school, they were welcomed by a new teacher. Miss Thompson had become a new person. She was no longer a judgmental teacher. The log in her eye was gone. Now she had clear vision, and she could see. Oh! how she could see! She could see real needs beneath those outward actions, and ways she could help remove specks. She was now a person committed to loving her children and doing things for them that would live on after her. By the end of that

school year, Teddy showed dramatic improvement and had caught up with most of the students.

She did not hear from Teddy for a long time. Then one day she received a note that said:

Dear Miss Thompson: I wanted you to be the first to know. I will be graduating second in my class. Love, Teddy Stallard.

Four years later, she received another note:

Dear Miss Thompson: They just told me I will be graduating first in my class. I wanted you to be the first to know. The university has not been easy, but I liked it. Love, Teddy Stallard.

Finally, she received another note:

Dear Miss Thompson: As of today, I am Theodore Stallard, M.D. How about that? I wanted you to be the first to know. I am getting married next month, the 27th to be exact. I want you to come and sit where my mother would sit if she were alive. You are the only family I have now; Dad died last year. Love, Teddy Stallard.

Miss Thompson went to that wedding. She deserved to sit where his mother would have sat; she had earned that right. She had done something for Teddy that changed his life forever.

That is my prayer for our body, that we would become a people who stop leaping to judge and begin looking to heal.

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# THE CONFIDENCE TO CARE

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Catalog No. 1099

Matthew 7:7-12

21st Message

Gary Vanderet

September 21st, 1997

As we come to the climax of our Lord's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount I am reminded of an incident from C. S. Lewis' "Chronicles of Narnia." In this encounter from the second book, "Prince Caspian," Lucy finally sees Aslan the lion, who symbolizes Christ:

*As she again gazed into his large wise face, he said, "Welcome, child."*

*"Aslan," said Lucy, "you're bigger."*

*"That is because you are older, little one," answered he.*

*"Not because you are?"*

*"I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger."*

It is my prayer that as a result of these studies from the gospel of Matthew, your view of God is becoming larger; and that you are sensing to a greater degree the assurance of his love and the strength of his power in your daily life.

One reason why many of us don't experience God's love and power is that we are too self sufficient. We don't realize that when it comes to being godlike, we don't have what it takes. "We are all ordinary people," said G.K. Chesterton, "and it is the extraordinary people who know it." The problem with many of us is that we are perilously adequate. As my friend David Roper writes: "We go our way believing in ourselves, our own power and personalities, relying on our own strength and show. But our self-confidence becomes a stumbling block. We are so good at what we do, we are no good at all. In terms of eternal significance, unaided humanity is useless!"

So God must thwart our energy at its source. He wears down our noble resolve through the frustrations of life, wringing out of us every vestige of self-confidence by disappointment and defeat. He allows our cherished projects to flounder; the wheels fall off our cleverly contrived programs; our dreams go belly up. He tutors us through our flops and failures until we learn that most precious of all of God's premises: We can't! And all of this is so that we might learn true confidence in dependence. Because when "can-do" can't, he tells us that he can, and therefore we can. Our strength, our ability to be God's men and women, to be what he has called us to be, flows from our relationship with him and our dependence on him. It takes God to be a man or woman. It takes God to make us godlike in the world.

That is what Jesus emphasizes throughout the Sermon on the Mount. It is why he began his remarks with the words, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Count yourself blessed when you realize at last that you are spiritually bankrupt. And so we come to what we have described as the climax of Jesus' teaching. Chapter 7, verse 7:

**"Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened. Or what man is**

**there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he shall ask for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him! (Matt 7:7-11, NASB)**

We might ask why the Lord introduces the subject of prayer at this juncture. What relationship do these verses have to the section we looked at last week?

The answer is simple: Prayer is the key to everything! Prayer is the highest expression of our dependence on God. Jesus has been talking about a righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees, a deep down righteousness that exhibits itself in godlike behavior wherever we go. And who can live like that? I can't! You can't! Therefore we need to ask God to give us what we need to accomplish what he asks.

Jesus is talking about our asking for character needs. We must ask for love, joy, peace, patience, self control, all those attributes of Christ's life that we need to display in the world. Our Lord is saying: "When you need them, just ask for them. When you seek for satisfaction, for something to fill you, ask God for it." God is a Father who gives. Do you need more love to live with that person you are with? Just ask for it. Do you need patience to bear up in that situation you are in? Just ask him. Do you need strength and moral courage today to resist the evil one? Whatever your need, just ask God and receive it from his hand. The only stipulation is that we must keep on asking. That is, we must be continually dependent on God.

What wonderful promises these are! Jesus is imprinting them on our minds through repetition. Notice the ascending scale of urgency in his direct commands: Ask...seek...knock. I see this occur regularly in our home in the interaction between our youngest son Timothy and his mother. If Kathy is nearby or visible, Timothy will ask. If he can't see her, he will seek. And if she is inaccessible in her room, he will knock. All three verbs which Jesus is quoted as using are present imperatives, implying that we should keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking.

The Greek language has many verb tenses that we don't have in English, and this makes it difficult to convey some ideas. I might illustrate the point that Jesus is making in this way. As our monthly electrical bill increases, I often remind my sons to turn off lights when they leave the house. Supposing one of my sons were to leave the house without doing that, and I were to instruct him in Greek, "Turn off the light!" I would probably use an aorist imperative, saying, "Go back and turn out the light." If, however, I called all four boys together and I said, "Turn out the lights," I would use a present tense imperative—the same tense that Jesus uses here. The point of my instruction



would be, keep turning off the lights as a pattern of life. That is what Jesus is saying.

Now our pattern of life ought to be to keep on asking of our heavenly Father! When we get up in the morning, the first thing we ought to do is talk to him. We should thank him for being there and being available. Let us take everything he gives us, receiving every attribute he bestows upon us. If we are moody in the morning, thank him that he is our joy and peace. Through the day as pressures arise, just keep on asking and receiving. Do you have a problem with worry? Then you need to pray. Do you have a problem with a critical and judgmental spirit? Talk to God about it and ask him for help. Do you have a problem with money and materialism? Pray to your father who loves to give good gifts.

In the parallel passage in Luke, the “good thing” that God gives is identified as the Holy Spirit. That is how we know that Jesus is speaking about character here. Luke’s rendition of this statement goes as follows: “If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” God will give you what you need. He will give you the resource to be good—the Spirit who is holy.

Jesus illustrates his promise with a very homely parable. He imagines a situation we all are very familiar with, a child coming to his father with a request. Which of you, he says, if your son asks for something wholesome to eat [that would be a miracle in itself!] (bread or fish), will give him something unwholesome, either inedible (a stone), or harmful (a poisonous snake). Of course, no one would do such a thing.

What father does not love to give good gifts to his children? A loving father seeing his child’s basic needs certainly would not intentionally give him something that would harm him. But the people of Jesus’ day really believed that was what the gods did. The gods could not be trusted. People believed they were mean and nasty, tricky and unreliable. Whenever the gods gave something there was always some sort of thorn hidden in the gift. There is a well known story in Greek mythology about the young goddess Aurora. She fell in love with a mortal, and she asked Zeus to give her lover immortality, because she wanted to live with him forever. Zeus played a trick on her. He gave the young man immortality, but he did not give him perpetual youth. He would get older and older, but he would not die. That is how pagans thought the gods acted, in mean and capricious ways.

But Jesus says that God the Father gives good gifts to his children. He is our Abba, our Daddy, who wants to give us what we need.

A lot of people imagine that God is a cranky old man who is forever out of sorts. They think he is so insecure that when people don’t respond to his love, he stomps around heaven shouting judgments and becoming angry at everyone because he can’t get it right. What a false impression of our loving heavenly Father! We are deeply loved by God. That is what Jesus is saying. God is a Father who wants to give, and he will always give what is good.

The point that Jesus is making is that though we as fathers are flawed and sinful, and thus our motives can oftentimes be questioned, yet we give good gifts. Even when we are doing good we can’t get away from the designation “evil,” because that is what we are—self-centered crea-

tures. The force of the parable lies more in a contrast than a comparison between our earthly and our heavenly fathers. Jesus is saying: “You don’t think that the Father who is perfect will give less than that, do you?” The God we are coming to is our Abba Father, and he is infinitely good and kind. God is good, as good as we are capable of imagining him to be. He is the only One who is good. That is what Jesus himself said, “no one is good but God.”

I am convinced that everything the devil does is designed for one purpose only, and that is to draw us away from God’s love. He wants to get us to believe that God is not good. If he can succeed in doing that we are in trouble, because we will want to take charge of our lives. It is not so much that the devil hates us, but that he hates God and will do anything to break his heart. And nothing breaks God’s heart more than being separated from those he loves. Because of that, let us keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking—because we will receive.

Some of you here this morning have brothers and sisters, parents and children or very good friends who do not know Jesus Christ. You have been praying for them for a long time. Yesterday, I led the funeral of an eighty-nine year-old man who met the Lord in the eighty-eighth year of his life. His family had prayed for him for years. The lesson is clear: Don’t stop praying! Don’t throw in the towel. Our Father listens and he hears our prayers. He will answer them according to his script, not ours.

Are you in the midst of a crisis at home? Are you having trouble in your relationship with your spouse or you parents? There are no promises that God will make your home into the place you long for, but he has promised to give you stability and supernatural help when the heat is on and all hell breaks loose. You can trust him even though others never come through for you.

Some of you struggle with a habitual sin in your life. Just when you see signs of progress you fall on your face. What you must do is believe God when he says “sin will not have dominion over you.” Keep trusting his word. Pick yourself up and go on even though you keep falling down. Don’t give up. One day you will be perfectly pure, even though today you are not. Will you trust Jesus and side and struggle with him against your sin?

Some of you are out of work and you are depleting your precious savings. You are beginning to wonder if the right job is ever going to come along. You must continue to believe that God will not leave you or forsake you; that he knows your needs and will not withhold any good thing; that you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you.

Certainly one of the good gifts that our heavenly Father gives us is his love, the “fruit of the Spirit.” So Jesus continues with these famous words which we have come to know as the Golden Rule. Verse 12:

**“Therefore, however you want people to treat you, so treat them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. (7:12)**

Every religion in the world has a statement similar to this, but every one of them is negative. Confucius is credited with having said: “Do not do to others what you would not wish done to yourself.” In 20 BC, someone asked the famous Rabbi Hillel to teach him the whole law while standing on one foot. He responded: “What is hateful to you, do not do to anyone else. This is the whole law; the rest is only commentary.”



But there is a huge difference between that negative saying and the positive initiative contained in Jesus' command. The negative command is passive. Let me put it this way. If I were to ask myself, "What don't I want?" one thing I certainly would not want is for someone to hit me on the head, so to avoid that I would not hit anyone. But if this is how we act we will spend all of life going around doing nothing. Jesus states it positively: He says we are responsible to take the initiative. Do you love to be loved (and who doesn't)? Then you ought to act lovingly. Do you love to be appreciated? Then how much time do you spend expressing appreciation to those who love and serve you? The positive is so much more penetrating than the negative.

John Stott reminds us: "Self-love is a very powerful force in our lives. We spend a great deal of time and energy protecting and trying to gain the best for ourselves. Now that we are in Christ, we are to take this bent toward self-advantage, which guides our behavior, and let it guide our behavior toward others." All we have to do is use our imagination. We have to put ourselves in the other person's shoes and ask, "How would I like to be treated in this situation?" As Bishop Ryle wrote: "It settles a hundred difficult points...it prevents the necessity of laying down endless little rules for our conduct in specific cases. In fact, it is a principle with such wide application that Jesus adds, 'for this is the Law and the Prophets.'" You don't need to ask the question many ask themselves at times: "What would Jesus do in this situation?" To that, Jesus would say: "How would you like to be treated?" That is what you should do.

There is a strong connection between these two, the command to live dependently on God and the command to love. As someone has put it, "By love our love is inspired." In other words, it is because of the love of God for us being poured into our hearts that we can now love and care for others. That is the key to love! It's not gritting your teeth and determining to act loving. Love flows naturally from a heart that is conscious of being loved. When Jesus had difficulty loving the disciples, he didn't take a deep breath and try to be nice. He began to reflect on how the Father loved him and how wonderful it was to be approved and loved of God. He strengthened and steadied himself with the fact that the Father cherished him. That is why he went away to a hillside to pray and renew himself in the Father's love. Afterwards he could come back and endure with patience the futilities and follies of those twelve men.

The way to love other people is to remind yourself of how much God loves you. When someone irritates you, review Christ's love for you. Stop and think of what the Lord did for you. He gave up his life for you. Think of how patient he is with you; how much he cares for you; how patient he is with your failures; how he supports you and acknowledges you as one of his own; how he tenderly provides for you. It is that wellspring of love that will enable you to love others, because you can't love from a vacuum.

I know that it's hard to love people at times, especially since we are born into this world as self-centered individuals. But once we gain an understanding of the intensity and immensity of God's love for us we can grow in our ability to love people just as they are. We can begin to accept them and love them as God loves us. Then, instead of

thinking only about ourselves and our things, we can begin to be more generous with our time and our toys. We can devote our energy and efforts for the sake of others. That is the radical change that comes when the love of God is poured into our hearts.

The Christian life is not difficult, it is impossible! I am not the kind of person who does this kind of thing naturally—and neither are you! That is why, unless the Holy Spirit takes up residence in our lives and Christ lives through us, we will never do unto others what we want them to do for us. That is a supernatural lifestyle. As Thomas Merton put it: "A saint is not someone who is good but someone who experiences the goodness of God." This is how we are called to live as Christians.

I want to close by reading a very moving piece that helps in applying Jesus' words. It is called "I Wish I'd Reached Her," by Harold Myra. These words will be especially meaningful to high schoolers and college students:

Lord, I never said anything nasty,  
but I admit I never accepted her—  
not as an equal.  
She was a spinster at 17,  
and she always would be.  
She reminded me of a skinny, leafless tree  
trying to grow on an expressway divider—  
surrounded by concrete and grumbling cars,  
roots into grass so sparse and exhaust-choked,  
other life avoided her.  
Even as a little kid,  
she must have been like that,  
alone, avoided,  
life roaring past her  
with no apology for the fumes.  
Who hugged the girl but her mother?  
Her face was angular, all bones, dark shadows,  
touches of black facial hair.  
In a car full of kids,  
I ducked to the back seat  
to make sure no one got the idea  
she was with me.

She became very religious  
and even went off to Bible school.  
I remember driving her somewhere  
while she was full of joy and resolutions.  
"No Bible, no breakfast," she told me,  
saying how vital  
you were to her.  
And that summer she got pregnant.  
That was the end of her bright new life—  
you don't go off to Bible school  
with a baby in your tummy.  
I wondered, then, unkindly,  
what hard-up misfit had touched her,  
had treated her like a person,  
had held her with affection,  
and suddenly nothing mattered to her  
so much as being  
held . . .

I don't know about that summer.  
But one thing she needed  
besides her Bible and Prayers:  
Christ to come alive in friends.  
Could I have touched her on the shoulder,  
laughed with her?  
Could the girls have been more like sisters  
than superior beings?  
Maybe she could have found a love  
that wouldn't have left her pregnant and alone.

Maybe she could have been strong  
and chosen for herself,  
if she'd found more of you in some of us.

Beautiful kids have more fun, don't they?  
They're the only ones who drink Pepsi,  
laughing like Nordic gods.  
They're the only ones who splash down rapids  
with glistening teeth to commercial music.  
They're the only ones who look so sexily tanned  
(are they the only ones with glands?).  
You tell us, Lord,  
"Don't be conformed to the world's standards;  
don't be pressed into its mold,"  
but it's been flashed into our brains  
in such volume the images drip over the edges.  
And the grubby look of jeans  
can't change the mental machinery  
and the vicious social games we play.

Yesterday,  
I sat in a restaurant full of college kids  
and a group of girls noisily sat down.  
They looked over at a pimple-faced guy  
two tables away,  
and I heard one snicker,  
"Oh, yuck!"  
What a thing to say of a human!  
How many times does a guy have to hear  
Oh, yuck!  
before he believes—really believes—  
"I am garbage."  
I am a walking, living, breathing  
pile of trash?"

A couple weeks ago, in this same restaurant,  
three guys and two girls came in.  
One girl, fairly attractive  
slid into a booth  
and a guy slid in with her.  
The other girl slipped in opposite them,  
but neither guy would slide in by her.  
They looked at each other awkwardly.  
Neither wanted to sit by her.  
In a few seconds, one guy succumbed,  
but everybody knew it wasn't by choice;  
his reputation was safe.

I wonder, Lord,  
what those seconds did to that girl.  
Did she feel like shrinking into her purse?  
Did those snide hesitations  
move her toward hating herself?  
Lord, why do you let a girl's beliefs  
about herself  
be found in her mirror?  
One girl believes herself a princess  
and holds court.  
Another girl believes,  
because of the shape of her nose,  
the toughness of her cheek,  
that she's a dog.  
And it permeates everything in her life:  
this self-disrespect.  
Lord, how could you  
put all those glands in her,  
those longings to be held,  
and have her clasp empty air all her life?

I read in a survey once  
that half the girls in America

never land one date in high school.  
Yet our culture screams,  
"A guy must touch you, kiss you,  
or you're not really alive."  
You hear the cruel asides in locker rooms,  
"So many dogs around this school."

A girl rode our bus in high school.  
She had orange, fuzzy hair,  
wore outlandish clothes from her mother  
and she drenched herself in perfume.  
I suppose she was saying,  
"Look at me! Look at me!  
I'm not only human, I'm a woman!"  
One day, she exploded at a senior guy—  
she couldn't articulate cleverly—  
it all came out in clichés like  
"You, Mr. High and Mighty,  
you think you're everything!"  
Later I asked her brother,  
"Have I ever given you that feeling—  
that I'm better than you?"  
He never did answer me,  
but looked out the window at the trees.

I met this fuzzy-haired creature once,  
alone between classes,  
and asked her where a certain teacher was.  
With just the two of us talking,  
suddenly we were two humans,  
like birds on the same rock,  
no audience to play to,  
no worries of who  
would be associated with whom.  
She answered my question,  
and we talked a minute.  
Although our words were no different,  
the chemistry was altered.  
For that moment. For about 90 seconds.  
But never again.

How much have I grown, Lord,  
beyond seeing friendships  
as plus or minus status coupons?  
Surely I don't still act that way!  
But do I find more sophisticated ways  
to shun the misfit?

Do I love the nobody,  
the social embarrassment?

Lord, help me not to be molded  
by the world's ad campaign  
of luscious lovelies  
and wind-blown men on boats and horses.  
By your Spirit, help me to see  
beneath the skin and posture, style and hair.  
For I'm told you yourself, Jesus,  
were nothing for looks  
But you sure are worth getting to know . . .

As the love of God is poured out into our hearts it is my  
prayer that we will treat others with kindness, goodness  
and care, the way we want to be treated.

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# THE INESCAPABLE CHOICE

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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Matthew 7:13-20

22nd Message

Gary Vanderet

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Christianity is not a philosophy, it is founded upon a person, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is central to everything Christians believe. Trying to take Jesus from Christianity would be like trying to take numbers from mathematics. It cannot be done. Other major religions center on certain beliefs, but Christianity centers on a person, an astonishing, marvelous, beautiful person.

There are a great many impressions of Christ going around today, but most of them are far removed from the biblical picture of Jesus. Listen to what Dorothy Sayers writes of him:

The people who hanged Christ never, to do them justice, accused him of being a bore—on the contrary; they thought him too dynamic to be safe. . . He was tender to the unfortunate, patient with honest inquirers, and humble before Heaven; but He insulted respectable clergymen by calling them hypocrites. He referred to King Herod as “that fox”; He went to parties in disreputable company and was looked upon as a “gluttonous man and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners”; He assaulted indignant tradesmen and threw them and their belongings out of the Temple; He drove a coach-and-horses through a number of sacrosanct and hoary regulations; He cured diseases by any means that came handy, with a shocking casualness in the matter of other people’s pigs and property; He showed no proper deference for wealth and social position; when confronted with neat dialectical traps, He displayed a paradoxical humor that affronted serious-minded people, and He retorted by asking disagreeably searching questions that could not be answered by rule of thumb. Jesus was emphatically not a dull man in His human lifetime. If he was God, there can be nothing dull about God, either. But He had “a daily beauty in His life that made us ugly,” and officialdom felt that the established order of things would be more secure without Him. So they did away with God in the name of peace and quietness.

Jesus is the most radical, the most revolutionary character in human history. More books have been written about him, more music has been composed to him, more portraits have been painted of him than any other person who has ever lived.

As we come to chapter 7 in our studies in the Sermon on the Mount, today we find that the main body of Jesus’ teaching is completed, and our Lord now begins his conclusion or application. He has finished his mani-

festo. He has explained what his kingdom is about and what its citizens will look like. He has contrasted two kinds of righteousness, two treasures, two masters, and two ambitions. Now the time for a decision has come. Which will we choose, the prevailing culture or the authentic Christian counter-culture he has been describing? Will it be the kingdom of Satan or the Kingdom of God?

In these verses notice that Jesus mentions two ways, two paths, two routes. Each has a gate, a road, and a destination, and a group of people are traveling on that road. Chapter 7, verse 13:

**“Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it. (Matt 7:13-14, NASB)**

What is immediately striking about these verses is the absolute nature of the choice set before us. We would prefer to have more choices than one, many more. Better yet, we would like to fuse them all into a blended religion; then we wouldn’t need to make a choice. As John Stott writes: “But Jesus cuts across our easygoing syncretism. He will not allow us the comfortable solutions we propose. Instead, he insists that ultimately there is only one choice, because there are only two possibilities to choose from.”

What a blow to our politically correct generation! Supposing you were in at the San Jose Arena for the Billy Graham Crusade last night and you were trying to get into the building. Together with thousands of others you were inching your way along, trying to press through the gates. While you were standing there, someone moved in alongside of you. He told you he was an official, and said that you were in the wrong line. No one in your line realized this, but all of you were going to end up in the parking lot, not the arena. The way to get into the arena, he said, was through a little door, which he pointed to. You looked and saw that the door indeed wasn’t very big, and you could not see any markings on it. You did see a few people going through it, but the overwhelming majority of people were in your line. You asked yourself, “Can all these people be wrong? Can I really believe that the little door which the man pointed to was the way into the arena?” That is the tension we are faced with when the Lord says “enter by the narrow gate”—because the whole world is going in the other direction! Their phi-

losophy of life is that you can do it all by yourself.

Jesus says that there are only two ways because there are only two choices. That has been true since the very beginning. We can either choose to subject ourselves to God and do things his way, or we can choose to go our own way, live our own life and make our own decisions. The choice that Adam faced is our choice as well. That is what the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil symbolized in the Garden. It wasn't the fruit itself that poisoned the man (there was nothing inherently evil about the fruit), it represented the choice that man has to make. He could either let God tell him everything, what is good and what is evil, or he could go his own way and learn for himself the nature of good and evil. He could experiment with life. He could try things out, live his own life, determine his own code of conduct.

The broad way is the world's way. It says you don't need anybody. It's crazy to give up your rights to serve anyone. After all, according to the marketers, you "only go through life once," you have got to "grab the brass ring," and "go for the gusto." We are assured that we have everything it takes to live life the way it ought to be lived. But Jesus says no, that is absolutely wrong. You don't have what it takes, because the righteousness that is expected of people is a supernatural righteousness. The only way to really be a man or a woman is to count on Jesus. It all depends on him! Jesus says, in effect, "You have to decide. Are you going to go with the crowd, or are you going to go through the narrow gate?"

The broad way is the easy way because nothing is required. We can take everything through that wide gate; we don't have to leave anything behind. The narrow way is hard, because it requires you to humble yourself, to admit your needs and confess your sins. You have to admit that you are spiritually bankrupt, that you have nothing to offer to God. You have to give up hoping for justice and plead for mercy. To enter this gate you have to leave some things behind: your pride, your selfish ambition, sometimes even your family and friends.

Not only are there two ways, two gates, and two groups, as a result, there are only two destinations. We see that in Psalm 1, where "prospering and perishing" are the two alternatives. Moses made it clearer still. He said, "See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil,...a blessing and a curse; therefore choose life." Humanity was made to be mastered. We will either be mastered by God or by sin. But we like to think there is a neutral position, that we can run our own lives and live independently. But that is a false view. We are either going to let God master our hearts, and be ruled by him, or sin will control us and conquer us. And destruction is the result of the latter way. Jesus says the broad way leads to destruction. The broad road is a suicide road.

One thing that complicates our decision is that most of the opinion formers, the leading thinkers, the movers

and shakers are telling us that the broad gate is the way to go. You have what it takes, we are assured. That is why Jesus says, in vv 15-20:

**"Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles, are they? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits. (7:15-20)**

This paragraph is not encouraging us to have a here-sy-hunting mentality. We already have too many self-appointed fruit inspectors running around, asking everyone to lift their leaves so that they can inspect their fruit. The Christian life is a full-time operation, taking care of your own fruit. In fact, Jesus has already warned about a critical and judgmental spirit. But he does not want us to be naive; he doesn't want us to be blind-sided.

In warning us to beware of false prophets, Jesus is assuming that there is an objective standard of truth from which the falsehood of false prophets is to be distinguished. Truth and falsehood naturally exclude one another.

There is an enemy, his name is Satan, and he is out to get you! There are invisible realities, both good and bad, governing and controlling human life. There is an evil one, a hater of men, working behind the scenes. He is a murderer who wants to destroy human beings. His goal is destruction, his process is deception. All this began in the garden when he deceived Eve with his lies, and the sin that resulted brought death to every living human being throughout history.

That lie that Satan whispered to Eve is still believed today. It says that God is not telling us the truth, that he is holding out on us. It says we are sufficient in ourselves to know good from evil, that we can become like God. That is a lie. We are human. We don't know all there is to know. We desperately need the revelation that comes from God alone. No one else can supply it. It can come from no other book.

Jesus has in mind here primarily the religious leaders of his day. "False prophets," he called them, "blind leaders of the blind." They were religious prophets. We can apply this today to anyone who puts himself in a position of prophecy, of proclaiming truth. We can apply it to the philosophers, the theologians, the psychiatrists, the marriage counselors, the economists, the politicians, the anthropologists, the social scientists, the movie producers, the people who form public opinion, who tell us what is right, who set the standard and say, "If you live this way you will find life!" But Jesus says, "Beware of what they tell you. It will not lead you to life. It will lead to destruction. And you will know them

by their fruit.”

The metaphor that Jesus uses to describe these false prophets who come in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves, reminds us that they are both dangerous and deceptive. The danger is that in reality they are wolves. In first century Palestine, wolves were the natural enemy of sheep. Sheep were defenseless against this vicious prey, thus a good shepherd was always on the lookout, protecting his sheep. In his parting words to the Ephesian elders, shortly before his death, Paul said: “I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.”

One of the main characteristics of false prophets in the Old Testament was their amoral optimism, their denial that God was the God of judgment as well as loyal love and mercy. Jeremiah accused such prophets of filling people with vain hopes. He said: “They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, ‘It shall be well with you.’ God says of them: ‘They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, “Peace, peace, when there is no peace.”’ This kind of teaching gives people a false sense of security. It lulls them to sleep in their sins. It fails to warn them of the impending judgment of God or tell them how to escape it.

False prophets do the same today. They are adept at blurring the issue of salvation. They distort the gospel so much, they make it difficult to find the narrow gate. Some say the narrow way is much broader than Jesus implied. And perhaps most dangerous of all, some say the broad road does not lead to destruction, that all roads lead to God. That is why Jesus compared false teachers to ravenous wolves. It is not because they are greedy for gain or power, but because they are extremely dangerous. They are responsible for leading some people to the very destruction which they claim does not exist.

So Jesus tells us to beware, to be on our guard. We must pray for discernment and use our minds. Don’t be dazzled by a person’s outward clothing, his charm, his learning, his degrees or honors. Students: Don’t be enamored by your professor’s personality, his knowledge or his oratorical skills. Look beneath the appearance to the reality and determine whether he is a sheep or wolf.

To help us do that, Jesus changes the metaphor. Although it may be possible to mistake a sheep for a wolf, a tree cannot hide its identity forever. Sooner or later it betrays itself by its fruit. Look at your teacher’s character. Is he humble and loving? Does he display kindness, goodness and self control? Or does he manifest enmity and selfishness, jealousy and self indulgence? Not only that, examine his message. Does it match up with the apostles’ teaching? Is there a clear understanding of Jesus’ deity and humanity? Finally, look at his influence. What effect does his teaching have on his followers?

False teaching promotes ungodliness and causes division. Sound teaching produces faith, love, and godliness.

The world is devastated by the exclusivity of the gospel, by its claim that there is only one way to salvation. Of course, that is an audacious claim— unless it is true. That is why read we read in Acts 4, “salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” And that is why Jesus said in John 14: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” We are not all climbing a mountain, each of us in our respective religions ascending in a slightly different way, yet all headed to the same destination. Going God’s way cannot be decided upon by an appeal to majority opinion. Salvation is not a popularity contest. You don’t vote on which way to be saved.

If you are planning to go heaven, you have to go God’s way. But doesn’t everyone have the right to his own opinion? you say. That is absolutely correct! But that does not mean that every opinion is right.

If you do not know Jesus Christ as your Savior, and you can see that you are on the broad road that leads to destruction, I cannot think of a better time or place or group of people for you to come to faith. The thrilling thing about the gospel is that by simple faith you can invite the Lord Jesus to come into your life. You can pass from darkness into his wonderful eternal light and receive the righteousness which God demands, which you could never provide, but which has been provided in the death of Jesus Christ.

At the San Jose Arena last night I was privileged to watch as hundreds of people stood up and admitted they did not have what it takes to live life. They left their seats and went down to the podium to receive Christ. The Christian life is not just difficult, it’s impossible, because it is a supernatural life. Christians are people who have admitted their inadequacy and have invited Christ to take control of their lives and be their Lord and Savior.

A few years ago I came across an article called the “The Art of Being a Big Shot,” by Howard Butts, which speaks very well to this issue. He writes:

It is my pride that makes me independent of God. It is appealing to me to feel that I am the master of my fate, that I run my own life, call my own shots, and go it alone. But that feeling is my basic dishonesty. I can’t go it alone. I have to get help from other people. I can’t ultimately rely on myself. I am dependent on God for my very next breath. It is dishonest of me to pretend that I am anything but a man, small, weak, and limited. So living independent of God is self-delusion. It is not just a matter of pride being an unfortunate little trait and humility being an attractive little virtue. It is my inner psychological integrity that is at stake. When I am conceited, I am lying to myself about what I am. I am pretending to be God and not

man. My pride is the idolatrous worship of myself, the national religion of hell.

If you have never before admitted your deep need, I invite you now to confess your inadequacy to God. Let today be the day that you are set free from the inner turmoil and restlessness that has characterized your life. You have been looking for something but all you have found is emptiness and despair. I pray that today will be the day when you agree to give all this up and submit to God and be mastered by him.

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# HOW TO STAND IN A STORM

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Catalog No. 1101

Matthew 7:21-29

23rd Message

Gary Vanderet

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Today we come to end of our series in the Sermon on the Mount. I have found these studies to be very significant. I trust they have been profitable in your walk of faith, too. In his discourse, our Lord's concern is not that we hear his words, or that agree with them, but that we obey them. Jesus is not concerned with making us smarter, but with making us godly. He is teaching for a verdict as he concludes his instruction with a passage of heart-piercing application.

In their significant book *The Day America Told the Truth*, Peter Cam and James Patterson revealed that only 13% of Americans regard the Ten Commandments as relevant or binding. They reported that most Americans routinely lie to their families, friends and associates. Americans admit goofing off at work an average of seven hours a week. Eighty-five per cent of those surveyed were convinced that they could work a lot better. One-half of the work force regularly calls in sick, despite the fact that they are feeling quite well. But the clincher came in this question asked by the surveyors: "What are you willing to do for 10 million dollars?" Twenty-five per cent said they would abandon their families; 23% said they would become a prostitute or a pimp for a week; and 7% said they would murder for 10 million dollars.

Upon hearing this, many people would think that what these authors were describing is the lifestyle of the non-Christian community. But no. Doug Sherman and Bill Hendricks did an extensive survey of the evangelical community and published a book on their findings, "Keeping Your Ethical Edge Sharp." Their shocking conclusion was that the values held in Christian circles were not much different from those of non-Christians. They found that Christians are as likely as non-Christians to falsify their income tax returns. I think I've shared with you about the letter the IRS received some time ago from a man who wrote: "Last year I falsified my income tax return, and I haven't been able to sleep since. Enclosed is \$125. If I still can't sleep, I'll send the rest." These researchers found that Christians were just as likely to bribe someone to obtain a building permit, ignore construction specifications, shift the blame for wrongdoing to someone else, and steal from the workplace.

These facts are a shocking indictment of the church.

Chad Walsh, in his book *Early Christians of the Twenty First Century*, writes:

Millions of Christians live in a sentimental haze of vague piety, with soft organ music trembling in the lovely light from stained-glass windows. Their religion is a pleasant thing of emotional quivers, divorced from the will, divorced from the intellect, and demanding little except lip service to a few harmless platitudes. I suspect that Satan has called off his attempt to convert peo-

ple to agnosticism. After all, if a man travels far enough away from Christianity, he is liable to see it in perspective and decide that it is true. It is much safer, from Satan's point of view, to vaccinate a man with a mild case of Christianity so as to protect him from the real disease.

Jesus wants to free us from this kind of phoniness and hypocrisy. In the Sermon on the Mount, he sets before us the radical choice between obedience and disobedience and calls us to an unconditional commitment to his teaching. In this concluding section he warns of two unacceptable alternatives, the first, a mere verbal profession (21-23), the second, a mere intellectual knowledge (24-27).

We pick up Jesus' words in chapter 7, verse 21:

**"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'" (7:21-23, NASB)**

Jesus is saying these people are relying for salvation on a creed they have affirmed, on what they "say" to him or about him: "Not everyone who says to me... On that day many will say to me." But Jesus insists our final destiny will be settled not by what we say to him today, or by what we say to him on the last day, but by whether we have done what he said, whether we have entered into a relationship with him.

On the surface, the faith professed by these people appears admirable. Note the marks of these individuals. They have orthodox beliefs. They address Jesus as Lord—a divine title. Notice also their apparent enthusiasm and devotion. They address Jesus not as "Lord," but as "Lord, Lord." It is as if the author wants to draw attention to their zeal. And they have an impressive record of spiritual experiences. They prophesied, they cast out demons, they performed miracles. Notice that Jesus does not deny any of those claims. These people are energetic workers who expect admission into the kingdom.

What better Christian profession could one give? Here are people who have called Jesus "Lord" enthusiastically, and in ministry. But Jesus' response is, "I never knew you." He is not talking about knowledge. He is not saying that he is unable to identify them. The word knowledge implies intimacy. Jesus is saying, "I never had a personal relationship with you." The issue is one of relationship. God's will is not to be admired or debated, but to be done. These people professed with their lips, not their lives. They called Jesus "Lord, Lord," but had never submitted to his lordship, and consequently never obeyed the will of the Heavenly Father.

Certainly these words of Jesus are not instructing that the way to enter the kingdom of heaven is by obedience, i.e. that we are saved by our good works. That would contradict not only this sermon, which began with the words, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," but the entire New Testament, which says that salvation comes only through the grace of God, through faith. What Jesus is saying is that people who belong to him, who have been saved, who know the love and grace of God in their lives will obey him; and they will express that faith through works.

The apostles of Jesus never forgot that truth. They all warned about the perils of merely making a verbal profession or having an intellectual knowledge. John, for instance, wrote in his letter: "If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie." John charges that the man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar. James warned: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." He went on: "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?" The answer, obviously, is no.

Charles Colson tells the story of a young woman in Washington D.C. who demonstrated the meaning of genuine faith. She shared her story with the church which she and her husband attended.

Four years ago this week, a young girl sat crying on the floor of a New Jersey apartment, devastated by the news of a lab report. Unmarried and alone, she had just learned she was pregnant...

'I considered myself a Christian at the time,' she continued. 'But I had found out about Christ while in the drug scene. After I learned about Him, I knew I wanted to commit myself to Him, but I couldn't give up my old friends or my old habits. So I was drifting between two worlds - in one still smoking dope every day and sleeping with the man who lived in the apartment below mine; in the other, going to church, witnessing to others, and working with the church youth group.

'But being pregnant ripped through the hypocrisy of my double life. I had been meaning to 'get right with God', but I kept slipping back. Now I couldn't live a nice, clean Christian life like all those church people.

'I felt the only answer was to wipe the slate clean. I would get on abortion; no one in the church would ever know.

'The clinic scheduled an abortion date. I was terrified, but my boyfriend was adamant. My sister was furious with me for being so stupid as to get pregnant. Finally, in desperation I wrote my parents. They were staunch Catholics, and I knew they would support me if I decided to have the baby. My mother called me: 'If you don't get an abortion, I don't want to see you while you're pregnant. Your life will be ruined and you'll deserve it.'

'I had always been desperately dependent on other people. But I knew this was one decision I had to make alone. I was looking out my bedroom window one night when I thought clearly for the first time in weeks. I realized I either believed this Christianity or I didn't believe it. And if I believed in Christ, then I couldn't do this. God is real, I thought, even if I've never lived like He is.

'That decision was a point of no return. I put my faith in

the God of the Bible, not the God I had made up in my head. I was still everything I never wanted to be - pregnant, alone, deserted by family, and rejected by the one I loved. Yet for the first time in my life I was really peaceful, because I knew for the first time I was being obedient.

'When I went to an obstetrician and told him of my decision to have the baby and why I had made that choice, he refused to charge me for the pre-natal care and delivery. I confessed my double life to the church, and through the support of Christians was able to move away from my old friends to an apartment of my own. I began going to a Christian counseling agency and felt God leading me to give the baby up for adoption.

'I had a beautiful baby girl and named her Sarah. She was placed with a childless Christian couple, and we all felt God's hand in the decision.

'And so that's why I praise God this evening. I thought in the depths of my despair that my life was ruined, but I knew I had to at least be obedient in taking responsibility for my sin. But today, because of that very despair and obedience, I have what I never thought I could - a godly husband and now a baby of our own. But what matters more than anything is that I have what I was searching for so desperately before—peace with God.'

That is what genuine faith produces: peace with God.

A verbal profession or an intellectual knowledge can never be a substitute for obedience, the fruit that comes from genuine faith. We are not studying the historical Jesus on the road from Nazareth to Jerusalem; we are studying the Lord Jesus Christ who has the right to rule as Lord of our lives.

Jesus concludes with a powerful and familiar story. Verse 24:

**"Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them, may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and [yet] it did not fall, for it had been founded upon the rock. And everyone who hears these words of Mine, and does not act upon them, will be like a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and it fell, and great was its fall." (7:24-27)**

Some will say, "Oh, I know that story. That's the one about the three little pigs. The first little pig built his out of straw, and the wolf blew it down. The second little pig built his house out of sticks, and the wolf blew that down. But the third little pig built his house out of bricks. And the wolf huffed and puffed, but he couldn't blow that house down." But that is not the story that Jesus is relating here. The point of the story of the Three Little Pigs (if there is one!) is to build your house appropriately—you should build a house that is strong. Jesus' point here is that we should build our house on the right foundation. In both cases the house represents our weak, frail humanity. The thing that will enable us to stand in the midst of life's storms, and in the final storm of judgment, is not our strength, or the strength of the brick structure we erected, but the foundation on which we build our life. And that is

what Jesus has been telling us all along: Count on me! Depend on me! Rely on me! Abide in me! He is the source of our life.

These are the two alternatives: We can either go it alone, and try to produce life out of our own resources, or we can count on Jesus and his resources.

So the sermon ends with our Lord presenting the same radical choice which we have seen throughout. Jesus hasn't presented a set of easy ethical rules, but rather a set of values that is entirely distinctive from those of the world we live in. He has called us to be different. He has described Christians as the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world." He has pointed out that the Christian and non-Christian communities are fundamentally different. John Stott put it this way, "The world is like rotting food, full of bacteria, which cause its disintegration. The followers of Jesus are to be the salt of the world, arresting its decay. The world is a dark and dismal place, lacking sunshine and living in shadows. The followers of Jesus are to be its light, dispelling its darkness and its gloom."

Jesus then went on to show how different Christians are: Our righteousness is to be deeper, reaching even our hearts. John Stott summarizes it this way, "Our love is to be broader, embracing even our enemies. Our giving and praying and fasting are to be genuine, not for show. For our treasure, we choose that which lasts for eternity, not that which disintegrates on earth."

Instead of conforming to the world we are called to imitate our Heavenly Father. And so the choice is either to follow the crowd or follow our Father. We will either be a reed swayed by the winds of public opinion or people ruled by God's Word. That is why Jesus' conclusion is so radical. There are only two ways (narrow and broad) and two foundations (rock and sand). We can't exaggerate the importance of the choice between these two, since one way leads to life while the other leads to destruction. Far more important than the choice of a life work or a life partner is the choice about life itself. Which road are you going to travel? On what foundation are you building?

The outcome of Jesus' teaching was not unexpected. Verse 28:

**The result was that when Jesus had finished these words, the multitudes were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes. (7:28-29)**

What struck the crowds, and the disciples, was Jesus' extraordinary authority. He didn't hum or haw or hesitate. He wasn't tentative, apologetic or arrogant. With quiet assurance he laid down the law for the citizens of God's kingdom. And the crowds were "amazed." That is a strong verb. One scholar translates it, "dumbfounded." They were astonished. And after nineteen hundred years, we are too.

What separated this Teacher from all the others? It was this: all the other teachers and scribes claimed no authority of their own. They delved into commentaries and claimed the support of famous rabbis. Their only authority lay in the authority they were quoting. But Jesus never received

a scribal education. He spoke with a freshness that captivated many but infuriated others. A.B. Bruce summed up the difference well when he said the scribes spoke, "by authority, while Jesus spoke with authority."

Matthew adds these last words to remind us that the purpose of the Sermon on the Mount is not simply to lead us to amazement, which it does, but to lead us to commitment and submission to Christ's authority. Having been exposed to Jesus' message, are we willing to experience it, to make the kinds of choices that will ultimately lead the Holy Spirit to produce this kind of life in us?

It is appropriate that we end our study by celebrating the Lord's Table. The only way we can live the kind of life described by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is by means of the resources that he has provided for us in his death and resurrection. He gave up his rights as the Son of God that he might come to earth and live among us, that we, too, might trust his Father in everything, as he did. He lived a perfect life and died a criminal's death that we might have life eternal. He took the penalty that was rightly due to us, separating himself from the Father that we might have fellowship with him. Now that same power that raised Jesus from the dead is available to us that we might live the way God designed life to be lived. The choice that each one of us faces is this: who is going to control our lives? Is it going to be God or the forces of darkness? As we come to the Table, let us examine ourselves. Is there something about us that we have not yet turned over to the Lord, some part of life where we have resisted his lordship? Let this be the day when we say to him, "Lord, I'm willing to change. Please have your way with me today that I may fully experience your lordship in every area of my life."

May God grant that we will take these amazing words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount and, by the power of the Holy Spirit residing within us, live them out daily in our homes, in our church, and in the world.

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