



A LIFE WORTH LIVING

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Matthew 5

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One of the most difficult things about preaching once or twice a year is deciding on a text. That is why I want to share with you this morning what God has been teaching me in my study of the gospel of Matthew with our college students during the past year. Of course, by taking too much text I'm breaking one of the primary rules of preaching. Thus we begin a whirlwind tour of discipleship as it is defined by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

Setting of Discipleship

The Sermon on the Mount is primarily concerned with defining what is required of Christians as disciples of Jesus. Several things lead me to this conclusion. First, at both the beginning and end of the sermon, Matthew writes about Jesus' calling of his disciples.

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him. Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. (Matt 4:18-21, NIV)

Another clue that the Sermon on the Mount is primarily concerned with discipleship is evident in Matthew's opening words in chapter 5:

Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, (Matt 5:1-2)

The implication is that Jesus' teaching, which follows, will focus on the essence of discipleship. Those who are committed to following this Jesus should take notice of what he regards as the defining marks of his followers.

Matthew goes on to give four characteristics of what biblical discipleship is. We will look briefly at these marks.

Beatitudes and a Repentant Heart

Our quest for the requirements of discipleship begins in the Beatitudes, Matthew 5:1-11. Most of us have already heard sermons on this well-known text, so rather than dissecting every line, let us try to find the theme of the entire text.

Notice immediately the repetition of the word "Blessed." We are so familiar with this word that we have difficulty articulating what it means. In this instance, blessed could be translated "congratulations." What is it that disciples of Jesus are to be congratulated for? Jesus answers this question with the twice-repeated assertion, "Yours is the Kingdom of Heaven." He begins with the very good news that those who commit to following him will have a part in the Kingdom of Heaven. This is Matthew's way of saying that we have been restored into a proper relationship with God, both now and in the future. We are to be congratulated, because as disciples we have entered into a life that is truly worth living.

So Jesus starts out with a word of encouragement, "Congratulations! You're in with me!" But look at the qualities ascribed to the "blessed": poor in spirit, mourners, meek, hunger and thirst for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, persecuted. This is not a list of qualities that the world holds in high esteem. If society were to dictate this list, it might look something like this: "Blessed are the privileged, the efficient, those who show no weakness, who hunger and thirst for success, are driven, savvy, independent, and proudly triumphant." The values that Jesus and the gospels portray contradict what our world values. The challenge to us is, whose values do we subscribe to?

The common theme that holds this list together is that these are all matters of the heart. When God wants to shape and change us, he doesn't start with our behavior, but with our hearts. Hearing words like poor in spirit, mourners, meek, hunger and thirst for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers and persecuted makes us realize that to attain these qualities we must have pure and repentant hearts.

This fits with chapters 3 and 4 of Matthew's gospel. There it says that the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus can be summed up by the statement, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near!"

It will be helpful to remember the condition of Israel's religious system during this time. The nation was occupied by the Romans. The Israelites understood this to be a continuation of the same exile that we have been hearing about in our studies in the book of Jeremiah over these past few weeks. They regarded the exile as a punishment for their past and present unfaithfulness. The Pharisees took it upon themselves to try and return Israel to faithfulness by observing the law, and thus end

the exile. Some of them even believed that if Israel kept the law for a week, from one Sabbath to the next, that Messiah would come and end their exile of Roman occupation. The result of all this was that the Pharisees were held in high esteem by most of the Israelites. They regarded them as the only faithful religious leadership. They were the ones standing up to Romans. They provided a hope for the future, and their lifestyles apparently were in line with the faith of the past.

But the irony is that both John the Baptist and Jesus had very serious issues with the teaching of the Pharisees. Their system emphasized legalist law keeping; it didn't necessarily require pure and repentant hearts. The Pharisees mistook living within the framework of the law as living correctly. Jesus shocked the status quo by asserting here in the Beatitudes that living within the law isn't nearly as important as having a pure and repentant heart. We can make the same mistake as the Pharisees. Too often we equate our behavior with whether or not God, our spouses, our peers or our parents will love us. Jesus' words rebuke our notion that our actions reveal the condition of our hearts. On the contrary, it is the condition of our hearts that determines our actions.

So the first and primary requirement for discipleship and entering into a life worth living is that we must be a people with pure and repentant hearts. Everything else is secondary.

Salt and Light: Tasty and Visible

Next, Jesus addresses how we are to interact with the world.

"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. (Matt 5:13-16)

Two images help us understand what our relationship with the world is to be. Let us take Jesus' second image, that of light, first. Believers are to be the light of the world, a city that cannot be hidden. We are to be visible.

This became very clear to me last week while I was at TYM camp with at-risk eight- to twelve-year-old boys. Each evening before we set off to campfire, the four boys in my teepee battled for our three flashlights. After an evening at campfire, night had completely fallen. Those flashlights provided the light we needed to get home.

That is our calling too: to be flashlights to the world, providing light so that others can find their way home.

We need to be visible. People should know that we have a hope and a faith in something other than ourselves. This is not to say that we should preach at everyone we meet. Rather, if we are to be a visible light, those with whom we regularly interact should notice that we are "different," and wonder why. How do we let our light shine? By honoring our family commitments, leaving work at a reasonable time, by not withholding the fact that faith and church are an important part of our lives. We need to show the whole of our lives to colleagues at work, in school, in the hair salon and the auto shop.

The second image that Jesus gives is that we are to be like salt. Salt was used for many things in the ancient world, but mainly it was a preservative and seasoning. Salt is very addicting. As believers, we should not only know what we believe, but people we come in contact with should find us appealing and addictive. We need to be "tasty" Christians. We are called to love people in such a way that they want more. Paul says we are to be a "fragrant aroma of Christ." Jesus doesn't command us to have perfect theology or live perfect lives. It's significant that the first thing he communicates to his disciples (after making sure their hearts were in the right place) is that they be the vehicles through whom the world will get to know him.

So the second characteristic of discipleship is that we must be a people who are visibly attached to Jesus and who are tasty, so that others keep coming back for more.

Six anti-theses: Love-bound not Law-bound

The next section of the Sermon on the Mount presents difficulties, because it begins with Jesus affirming that he hasn't come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. Here is what he says,

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. (Matt 5:17)

Then Jesus says,

"For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matt 5:20)

The implications of these two statements are as follows: Jesus understood his ministry to be completely in line with the law as it is given in the Old Testament; and that the Pharisees and Scribes, the very ones who had devoted much of their existence to living within the letter of law, were not righteous enough to be congratulated about their secure place in the Kingdom of Heaven. This must have been an overwhelming revelation to the disciples. Jesus maintains the importance of the law, but he insists that those who devoted themselves to keeping it aren't worthy of the Kingdom. We can imagine what the disciples were thinking: What does that say about me? If the Pharisees and Scribes can't get it right, how can I?

Jesus follows with six examples of what living in a right relationship to the law looks like.

'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. (Matt 5:21-22)

'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (5:27-28)

'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery. (5:31-32)

'Do not break your oaths but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' But I tell you, Do not swear at all. (5:33-34)

'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. (5:38-39)

'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (5:43-45, 48)

My response to reading these six statements of Jesus is twofold. First: Yes, this is right. Living a life that is committed to following Jesus means that one should not be angry, one should avoid lust, be committed in marriage, keep one's oaths, turn the other cheek, and love one's enemies. That is how Jesus lived — and that should be what I should aspire to as well. But that's impossible. I continue to be angry, lustful, unfaithful, un-oathworthy, non-cheek-turning. I can't stand my enemies, much less pray for them. Jesus' example and standard of living within the law is impossible for me to fulfill. What am I to do?

The secret to understanding what Jesus is saying here lies in knowing the context of his day and paying attention to the last example in the list that he gives. Many of the Pharisees and Scribes of Jesus' day were more interested in living within the letter of the law than observing its intent. Jesus' problem wasn't with the law, but with those who were making a practice of knowing the loopholes in the law more thoroughly than its intent. So he draws us back to the intent of the law by removing the loopholes, and emphasizing its intent by ending with the command, "Love your enemies." This is given special emphasis by being placed last in the list, with the exclamation, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Jesus' point here is that the law has always been there to direct us to love extravagantly. Any understanding or practice of the law that doesn't have loving others as its ultimate intent, as Jesus and his perfect Father in heaven loves us, is misguided. This

is confirmed elsewhere in Matthew's gospel, when Jesus is questioned about the law.

One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matt 22:35-40)

So what do we make of Jesus' understanding of the law, and how does this affect us? First, we need to make sure that we are people who are bound by love and not law.

Let me give you an example. Two summers ago, I led a team of college students to Moldova and Romania. In a small rural town we were invited to visit the home of an elderly couple. They proudly showed us their home, and were obviously delighted to have us as their guests. At one point, the woman opened a bottle of their home-made wine, which they had saved for a special occasion. The students were not quite sure how to respond. Not all of them were of legal drinking age. Should we partake and break the law, or refuse and break her heart? Put in that light, the answer was easy. We accepted her lavish hospitality by drinking bad wine from Dixie cups on that splendid Moldovan summer day!

As we enter into the life worth living by following our Lord we must always remember to be bound by love and not law.

The Lord's Prayer: God-dependent not Independent

Much of chapter 6 is devoted to giving, praying, fasting, and trusting in God to provide. What are Matthew and Jesus trying to say by grouping these topics together? In each case, if we give of our money or time, ask and acknowledge God in prayer, fast to acknowledge him as our provider and trust that he cares for us, we acknowledge our dependence on him. The final challenge or characteristic posed by Matthew and Jesus is that we need to be people who are God-dependent, not independent.

The Lord's prayer wonderfully illustrates this. Notice how seriously we take God and how dependent on him we are when we pray

**"Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.' (Matt 6:9-13)**

The first two words show that we are to be in a relationship with "Our Father." As hard as some of us might try, we are never completely independent of our fathers. I see my Dad in my own appearance, habits and character. I'm reminded of my dependence on him every time I think of the down payment we made on our house. We never would have made here without him. Similarly, when we pray "Our Father," we acknowledge that God himself plays a supremely important role in our lives. We cannot make it without him.

Next, we learn from the Lord's Prayer that the prayer is really all about him. We acknowledge his name and character, his will for our lives, and his kingdom or plan for the world and those around us. As believers, God becomes the center of all that we are. True prayer is all about making him a part of our lives. In praising his name, submitting to his will, and looking for his kingdom, we become people who can't live independent of him.

Finally, prayer reminds us that we need God for everything that is truly important. We need him for the sustenance of our daily bread. We need him for the forgiveness that reunites us to him. We need him to save us, because we are utterly unable to save ourselves.

Matthew reminds us that Jesus wants his disciples to be completely dependent on him — to be God-dependent. How counter-cultural! We just celebrated Independence Day. We idolize the person who needs no one, who is self-sufficient. But, as disciples who are entering into a life worth living, with hope, we not only don't have to be completely independent and competent, we are commanded to be dependent on the only One who is completely competent to provide for us, forgive us and save us when we can't help ourselves.

Thus we have what Matthew and Jesus understood to be the essential requirements of following our Lord. A life of following Jesus is certainly a life worth living. While our challenge is to try to live in a way that manifests these qualities, the good news is that we don't have to do it alone. We have one another, but more important, we have the indwelling Spirit of God himself at work in us to make us people who manifest the qualities that Jesus sets out in the Sermon on the Mount:

1. Repentant hearts
2. Visible and tasty
3. Love-bound, not Law-bound
4. God-dependent, not independent

I will conclude with Jesus' final words to his disciples as he sent them to live out in the way he had modeled for them:

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matt 28:18-20)

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