

Sermon on the Mount Overview

THE KING'S PRINCIPLES: TRUE RIGHTEOUSNESS

Matthew 5

Background: *Matthew 4:17-5:2 From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." ¹⁸ While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men". ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. ²³ And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. ²⁴ So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them. ²⁵ And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. 5 Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:*

The Sermon on the Mount is one of the most misunderstood messages that Jesus ever gave.

One group says it is God's plan of salvation, that if we ever hope to go to heaven we must obey these rules. Another group calls it a "charter for world peace" and begs the nations of the earth to accept it. Still a third group tells us that the Sermon on the Mount does not apply to today, but that it will apply at some future time, perhaps during the Tribulation or the millennial kingdom.

I have always felt that Matthew 5:20 was the key to this important sermon: "For I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven." ***The main theme is true righteousness.*** The religious leaders had an artificial, external righteousness based on Law. But the righteousness Jesus described is a true and vital righteousness that begins internally, in the heart. The Pharisees were concerned about the minute details of conduct, but they neglected the major matter of ***character. Conduct flows out of character.***

Whatever applications the Sermon on the Mount may have to world problems, or to future events, it is certain that this sermon has definite applications for us today. Jesus gave this message to individual believers, not to the unsaved world at large. What was taught in the Sermon on the Mount is repeated in the New Testament epistles for the church today. Jesus originally gave these words to His disciples (Matthew 5:1), and they have shared them with us.

In this chapter, Jesus gave three explanations about true, spiritual righteousness.

What True Righteousness Is (Matthew 5:1–16)

Being a master Teacher, our Lord did not begin this important sermon with a negative criticism of the scribes and Pharisees. He began with a positive emphasis on righteous character and the

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blessings that it brings to the life of the believer. The Pharisees taught that righteousness was an external thing, a matter of obeying rules and regulations. Righteousness could be measured by praying, giving, fasting, etc. In the Beatitudes and the pictures of the believer, Jesus described Christian character that flowed from within.

Imagine how the crowd's attention was riveted on Jesus when He uttered His first word: "Blessed." (The Latin word for blessed is *beatus*, and from this comes the word *beatitude*.) This was a powerful word to those who heard Jesus that day. To them it meant "divine joy and perfect happiness." The word was not used for humans; it described the kind of joy experienced only by the gods or the dead. "Blessed" implied an inner satisfaction and sufficiency that did not depend on outward circumstances for happiness. This is what the Lord offers those who trust Him!

The Beatitudes describe the attitudes that ought to be in our lives today. Four attitudes are described here.

- 1) Our attitude toward ourselves (v. 3, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven").** To be poor in spirit means to be humble, to have a correct estimate of oneself (Rom. 12:3). It does not mean to be "poor spirited" and have no backbone at all! "Poor in spirit" is the opposite of the world's attitudes of self-praise and self-assertion. It is not a false humility that says, "I am not worth anything, I can't do anything!" It is honesty with ourselves: we know ourselves, accept ourselves, and try to be ourselves to the glory of God.
- 2) Our attitude toward our sins (vv. 4–6, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied").** We mourn over sin and despise it. We see sin the way God sees it and seek to treat it the way God does. Those who cover sin or defend sin certainly have the wrong attitude. We should not only mourn over our sins, but we should also meekly submit to God (see Luke 18:9–14; Phil. 3:1–14). Meekness is not weakness, for both Moses and Jesus were meek men (Num. 12:3; Matthew 11:29). This word translated "meek" was used by the Greeks to describe a horse that had been broken. It refers to power under control.
- 3) Our attitude toward the Lord (vv. 7–9, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God").** We experience God's mercy when we trust Christ (Eph. 2:4–7), and He gives us a clean heart (Acts 15:9) and peace within (Rom. 5:1). But having received His mercy, we then *share* His mercy with others. We seek to keep our hearts pure that we might see God in our lives today. We become peacemakers in a troubled world and channels for God's mercy, purity, and peace.
- 4) Our attitude toward the world (vv. 10–16, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."¹¹ "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.¹³ "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet."¹⁴ "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden."¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand,**

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and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ *In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven”).* It is not easy to be a dedicated Christian. Our society is not a friend to God nor to God’s people. Whether we like it or not, there is *conflict* between us and the world. Why? Because we are different from the world and we have different attitudes.

As we read the Beatitudes, we find that they represent an outlook radically different from that of the world. The world praises pride, not humility. The world endorses sin, especially if you “get away with it.” The world is at war with God, while God is seeking to reconcile His enemies and make them His children. We must expect to be persecuted *if* we are living as God wants us to live. But we must be sure that our suffering is not due to our own foolishness or disobedience.

How True Righteousness Comes (Matthew 5:17–20)

Certainly after the crowd heard our Lord’s description of the kind of person God blesses, they said to themselves, “But we could *never* attain that kind of character. How can we have this righteousness? Where does it come from?” They wondered how His teaching related to what they had been taught all their lives. What about Moses and the Law?

In the Law of Moses, God certainly revealed His standards for holy living. The Pharisees defended the Law and sought to obey it. But Jesus said that the true righteousness that pleases God must *exceed* that of the scribes and Pharisees—and to the common people, the scribes and Pharisees were the holiest men in the community! *If they* had not attained, what hope was there for anybody else?

Jesus explained His own attitude toward the Law by describing three possible relationships.

1) *We can seek to destroy the Law (v. 17a, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets).* The Pharisees thought Jesus was doing this. To begin with, His *authority* did not come from any of the recognized leaders or schools. Instead of teaching “from authorities” as did the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus taught *with authority*.

Not only in His authority, but also in His *activity*, Jesus seemed to defy the Law. He deliberately healed people on the Sabbath Day and paid no attention to the traditions of the Pharisees. Our Lord’s *associations* also seemed contrary to the Law, for He was the friend of publicans and sinners.

Yet, it was the Pharisees who were destroying the Law! By their traditions, they robbed the people of the Word of God; and by their hypocritical lives, they disobeyed the very Law that they claimed to protect. The Pharisees thought they were *conserving* God’s Word, when in reality they were *preserving* God’s Word: embalming it so that it no longer had life! Their rejection of Christ when He came to earth proved that the inner truth of the Law had not penetrated their hearts.

Jesus made it clear that He had come to honor the Law and help God’s people love it, learn it, and live it. He would not accept the artificial righteousness of the religious leaders. Their righteousness was only an external masquerade. Their religion was a dead ritual, not a living relationship. It was artificial; it did not reproduce itself in others in a living way. It made them proud, not humble; it led to bondage, not liberty.

2) *We can seek to fulfill the Law (v. 17b, I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them).* Jesus Christ fulfilled God’s Law in every area of His life. He fulfilled it in His birth because He was “made under the Law” (Gal. 4:4). Every prescribed ritual for a Jewish boy

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was performed on Him by His parents. He certainly fulfilled the Law in His life, for nobody was ever able to accuse Him of sin. While He did not submit to the traditions of the scribes and Pharisees, He always did what God commanded in the Law. The Father was “well pleased” with His Son (Matthew 3:17; 17:5).

Jesus also fulfilled the Law in His teaching. It was this that brought Him into conflict with the religious leaders. When He began His ministry, Jesus found the Living Word of God encrusted with man-made traditions and interpretations. He broke away this thick crust of “religion” and brought the people back to God’s Word. Then, He opened the Word to them in a new and living way—they were accustomed to the “letter” of the Law and not the inner “kernel” of life.

But it was in His death and resurrection that Jesus especially fulfilled the Law. He bore the curse of the Law (Gal. 3:13). He fulfilled the Old Testament types and ceremonies so that they no longer are required of the people of God (see Heb. 9–10). He set aside the Old Covenant and brought in the New Covenant.

Jesus did not destroy the Law by fighting it; He destroyed it by *fulfilling* it! Perhaps an illustration will make this clear. If I have an acorn, I can destroy it in one of two ways. I can put it on a rock and smash it to bits with a hammer. Or, I can plant it in the ground and let it *fulfill itself* by becoming an oak tree.

When Jesus died, He rent the veil of the temple and opened the way into the holiest (Heb. 10:19). He broke down the wall that separated the Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:11–13). Because the Law was fulfilled in Christ, we no longer need temples made with hands (Acts 7:48ff) or religious rituals (Col. 2:10–13).

How can we fulfill the Law? By yielding to the Holy Spirit and allowing Him to work in our lives (Rom. 8:1–3). The Holy Spirit enables us to experience the “righteousness of the law” in daily life. This does not mean we live sinless perfect lives, but it does mean that Christ lives out His life through us by the power of His Spirit (Gal. 2:20).

When we read the Beatitudes, we see the perfect character of Jesus Christ. While Jesus never had to mourn over His sins, since He was sinless, He was still a “man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isa. 53:3). He never had to hunger and thirst after righteousness since He was the holy Son of God, but He did delight in the Father’s will and find His satisfaction in doing it (John 4:34). The only way we can experience the righteousness of the Beatitudes is through the power of Christ.

3) *We can seek to do and teach the Law (v.18-19, For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven).* This does not mean we major on the Old Testament and ignore the New! Second Corinthians 3 makes it clear that ours is a ministry of the *New Covenant*. But there is a proper ministry of the Law (1 Tim. 1:9ff) that is not contrary to the glorious message of God’s grace. Jesus wants us to know more of the righteousness of God, obey it, and share it with others. The moral law of God has not changed. Nine of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament epistles and commanded to believers. (The exception is the Sabbath commandment, which was given as a sign to Israel, see Neh. 9:14.)

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We do not obey an external Law because of fear. No, believers today obey an internal Law *and live because of love*. The Holy Spirit teaches us the Word and enables us to obey. Sin is still sin, and God still punishes sin. In fact, we in this present age are *more* responsible because we have been taught and given more!

How Righteousness Works in Daily Life (Matthew 5:21–48)

Jesus took six important Old Testament laws and interpreted them for His people in the light of the new life He came to give. He made a fundamental change without altering God's standards: He dealt with the attitudes and intents of the heart and not simply with the external action. The Pharisees said that righteousness consisted of performing certain actions, but Jesus said it centered in the attitudes of the heart.

Likewise, with sin: The Pharisees had a list of external actions that were sinful, but Jesus explained that sin came from the attitudes of the heart. Anger is murder in the heart; lust is adultery in the heart. The person who says that he "lives by the Sermon on the Mount" may not realize that the Sermon on the Mount is *more difficult* to keep than the original Ten Commandments!

Murder (vv. 21–26; [Ex. 20:13] ²⁰ *For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.* ²¹ *"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.'* ²² *But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.* ²³ *So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you,* ²⁴ *leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.* ²⁵ *Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison.* ²⁶ *Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.*). I have read that one out of every thirty-five deaths in Chicago is a murder, and that most of these murders are "crimes of passion" caused by anger among friends or relatives. Jesus did not say that anger leads to murder; He said that anger *is* murder.

There is a holy anger against sin (Eph. 4:26), but Jesus talked about an unholy anger against people. The word He used in Matthew 5:22 means "a settled anger, malice that is nursed inwardly." Jesus described a sinful experience that involved several stages. First there was *causeless anger*. This anger then exploded into *words*: "Raca—empty-headed person!" These words added fuel to the fire so that the person said, "You fool—rebel!"

Anger is such a foolish thing. It makes us destroyers instead of builders. It robs us of freedom and makes us prisoners. To hate someone is to commit murder in our hearts (1 John 3:15).

This does not mean that we should go ahead and murder someone we hate, since we have already sinned inwardly. Obviously, sinful feelings are not excuses for sinful deeds. Sinful anger robs us of fellowship with God as well as with our brothers, but it does not put us into jail as murderers. However, more than one person has become a murderer because he failed to control sinful anger.

Sinful anger must be faced honestly and must be confessed to God as sin. We must go to our brother and get the matter settled, and we must do it quickly. The longer we wait, the worse the

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bondage becomes! We put ourselves into a terrible prison when we refuse to be reconciled. (See Matthew 18:15–20 for additional counsel.) It has well been said that the person who refuses to forgive his brother destroys the very bridge over which he himself must walk.

Adultery (vv. 27–30; [Ex. 20:14] ²⁷ *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’* ²⁸ *But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.* ²⁹ *If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.* ³⁰ *And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.* Jesus affirmed God’s law of purity, and then explained that the intent of this law was to reveal the sanctity of sex and the sinfulness of the human heart. God created sex, and God protects sex. He has the authority to regulate it and to punish those who rebel against His laws. He does not regulate sex because He wants to rob us, but rather, because He wants to bless us. Whenever God says, “No” it is that He might say “Yes.”

Sexual impurity begins in the desires of the heart. Again, Jesus is not saying that lustful desires are identical to lustful deeds, and therefore a person might just as well go ahead and commit adultery. The desire and the deed are not identical, but spiritually speaking, they are equivalent. The “look” that Jesus mentioned was not a casual glance, but a constant stare *with the purpose of lusting*. It is possible for a man to glance at a beautiful woman and know that she is beautiful, but not lust after her. The man Jesus described looked at the woman *for the purpose of feeding his inner sensual appetites* as a substitute for the act. It was not accidental; it was planned.

How do we get victory? By purifying the desires of the heart (appetite leads to action) and disciplining the actions of the body. Obviously, our Lord is not talking about literal surgery; for this would not solve the problem in the heart. The eye and the hand are usually the two “culprits” when it comes to sexual sins, so they must be disciplined. Jesus said, “Deal immediately and decisively with sin! Don’t taper off—cut off!” Spiritual surgery is more important than physical surgery, for the sins of the body can lead to eternal judgment. We think of passages like Colossians 3:5 and Romans 6:13; 12:1–2; 13:14.

Divorce (vv. 31–32, *“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’* ³² *But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.* Our Lord dealt with this in greater detail in Matthew 19:1–12.

Swearing (vv. 33–37; [Lev. 19:12; Deut. 23:23] ³³ *“Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’* ³⁴ *But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,* ³⁵ *or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.* ³⁶ *And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.* ³⁷ *Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.* This is not the sin of “cursing,” but the sin of using oaths to affirm that what is said is true. The Pharisees used all kinds of tricks to sidestep the truth, and oaths were among them. They would avoid using the holy name of God, but they would come close by using the city of Jerusalem, heaven, earth, or some part of the body.

Jesus taught that our conversation should be so honest, and our character so true, that we would not need “crutches” to get people to believe us. Words depend on character, and oaths

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cannot compensate for a poor character. “In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin; but he that refraineth his lips is wise” (Prov. 10:19). The more words a man uses to convince us, the more suspicious we should be.

Retaliation (vv. 38–42; [Lev. 24:19–22] ³⁸ “*You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’* ³⁹ *But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.* ⁴⁰ *And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.* ⁴¹ *And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.* ⁴² *Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.*”). The original law was a fair one; it kept people from forcing the offender to pay a greater price than the offense deserved. It also prevented people from taking personal revenge. Jesus replaced a law with an attitude: be willing to suffer loss yourself rather than cause another to suffer. Of course, He applied this to *personal insults*, not to groups or nations. The person who retaliates only makes himself and the offender feel worse; and the result is a settled war and not peace.

In order to “turn the other cheek,” we must stay where we are and not run away. This demands both faith and love. It also means that we will be hurt, but it is better to be hurt on the outside than to be harmed on the inside. But it further means that *we should try to help the sinner*. We are vulnerable, because he may attack us anew; but we are also victorious, because Jesus is on our side, helping us and building our characters. Psychologists tell us that violence is born of weakness, not strength. It is the strong man who can love and suffer hurt; it is the weak man who thinks only of himself and hurts others to protect himself. He hurts others then runs away to protect himself.

Love of enemies (vv. 43–48; [Lev. 19:17–18] ⁴³ “*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’* ⁴⁴ *But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,* ⁴⁵ *so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.* ⁴⁶ *For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?* ⁴⁷ *And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?* ⁴⁸ *You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*”). Nowhere did the Law teach hatred for one’s enemies. Passages like Exodus 23:4–5 indicate just the opposite! Jesus defined our enemies as those who curse us, hate us, and exploit us selfishly. Since Christian love is an act of the will, and not simply an emotion, He has the right to command us to love our enemies. After all, He loved us when we were His enemies (Rom. 5:10). We may show this love by blessing those who curse us, doing good to them, and praying for them. When we pray for our enemies, we find it easier to love them. It takes the “poison” out of our attitudes.

Jesus gave several reasons for this admonition. (1) This love is a mark of maturity, proving that we are *sons* of the Father, and not just little children. (2) It is Godlike. The Father shares His good things with those who oppose Him. Matthew 5:45 suggests that our love “creates a climate” of blessings that makes it easy to win our enemies and make them our friends. Love is like the sunshine and rain that the Father sends so graciously. (3) It is a testimony to others. “What do ye more than others?” is a good question. God expects us to live on a much higher plane than the lost people of the world who return good for good and evil for evil. As Christians, we must return good for evil as an investment of love.

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The word *perfect* in Matthew 5:48 does not imply *sinlessly* perfect, for that is impossible in this life (though it is a good goal to strive for). It suggests completeness, maturity, as the sons of God. The Father loves His enemies and seeks to make them His children, and we should assist Him!

THE KING'S PRINCIPLES: TRUE WORSHIP

Matthew 6

The true righteousness of the kingdom must be applied in the everyday activities of life. This is the emphasis in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus related this principle to our relationships to God in worship (Matthew 6:1–18), our relationship to material things (Matthew 6:19–34), and our relationship to other people (Matthew 7:1–20).

Jesus also warned about the danger of hypocrisy (Matthew 6:2, 5, 16), the sin of using religion to cover up sin. A hypocrite is not a person who falls short of his high ideals, or who occasionally sins, because all of us experience these failures. A hypocrite *deliberately* uses religion to cover up his sins and promote his own gains. The Greek word translated *hypocrite* originally meant “an actor who wears a mask.”

The righteousness of the Pharisees was insincere and dishonest. They practiced their religion for the applause of men, not for the reward of God. But true righteousness must come from within. We should test ourselves to see whether we are sincere and honest in our Christian commitment. In this chapter, Christ applied this test to four different areas of life.

Our Giving (Matthew 6:1–4, *“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.”*² *“Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.”*³ *But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,*⁴ *so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.)* Giving alms to the poor, praying, and fasting were important disciplines in the religion of the Pharisees. Jesus did not condemn these practices, but He did caution us to make sure that our hearts are right as we practice them. The Pharisees used almsgiving to gain favor with God and attention from men, both of which were wrong motives. No amount of giving can purchase salvation; for salvation is the gift of God (Eph. 2:8–9). And to live for the praise of men is a foolish thing because the glory of man does not last (1 Peter 1:24). It is the glory and praise of God that really counts!

Our sinful nature is so subtle that it can defile even a good thing like sharing with the poor. If our motive is to get the praise of men, then like the Pharisees, we will call attention to what we are doing. But if our motive is to serve God in love and please Him, then we will give our gifts without calling attention to them. As a result, we will grow spiritually; God will be glorified; and others will be helped. But if we give with the wrong motive, we rob ourselves of blessing and reward and rob God of glory, even though the money we share might help a needy person.

Does this mean that it is wrong to give openly? Must all giving be anonymous? Not necessarily, for everyone in the early church knew that Barnabas had given the income from the

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sale of his land (Acts 4:34–37). When the church members laid their money at the Apostles' feet, it was not done in secret. The difference, of course, was in the *motive* and *manner* in which it was done. A contrast is Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11), who tried to use their gift to make people think they were more spiritual than they really were.

Our Praying (Matthew 6:5–15)

Jesus gave four instructions to guide us in our praying.

We must pray in secret before we pray in public (v. 5-6, *“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.”*⁶ *But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*). It is not wrong to pray in public in the assembly (1 Tim. 2:1ff), or even when blessing food (John 6:11) or seeking God's help (John 11:41–42; Acts 27:35). But it is wrong to pray in public if we are not in the habit of praying in private. Observers may think that we are practicing prayer when we are not, and this is hypocrisy. The word translated *closet* means “a private chamber.” It could refer to the store-chamber in a house. Our Lord prayed privately (Mark 1:35); so did Elisha (2 Kings 4:32ff) and Daniel (Dan. 6:10ff).

We must pray sincerely (vv. 7–8, *“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words.”*⁸ *Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*). The fact that a request is repeated does not make it a “vain repetition”; for both Jesus and Paul repeated their petitions (Matthew 26:36–46; 2 Cor. 12:7–8). A request becomes a “vain repetition” if it is only a babbling of words without a sincere heart desire to seek and do God's will. The mere reciting of memorized prayers can be vain repetition. The Gentiles had such prayers in their pagan ceremonies (see 1 Kings 18:26).

My friend Dr. Robert A. Cook has often said, “All of us have one routine prayer in our system; and once we get rid of it, then we can really start to pray!” I have noticed this, not only in my own praying, but often when I have conducted prayer meetings. With some people, praying is like putting the needle on a phonograph record *and then forgetting about it*. But God does not answer insincere prayers.

We must pray in God's will (vv. 9–13, *Pray then like this: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.”*¹⁰ *Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”*¹¹ *Give us this day our daily bread,*¹² *and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”*¹³ *And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*). This prayer is known familiarly as “The Lord's Prayer,” but “The Disciples' Prayer” would be a more accurate title. Jesus did not give this prayer to us to be memorized and recited a given number of times. In fact, He gave this prayer *to keep us* from using vain repetitions. Jesus did not say, “Pray in these words.” He said, “Pray after this manner”; that is, “Use this prayer as a pattern, not as a substitute.”

The purpose of prayer is to glorify God's name, and to ask for help to accomplish His will on earth. This prayer begins with *God's* interests, not ours: God's name, God's kingdom, and God's will. Robert Law has said, “Prayer is a mighty instrument, not for getting man's will done in heaven, but for getting God's will done in earth.” We have no right to ask God for anything that will dishonor His name, delay His kingdom, or disturb His will on earth.

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It is worth noting that there are *no singular pronouns* in this prayer; they are all plural. It begins with “OUR Father.” When we pray, we must remember that we are part of God’s worldwide family of believers. We have no right to ask for ourselves anything that would harm another member of the family. If we are praying in the will of God, the answer will be a blessing to all of God’s people in one way or another.

If we put God’s concerns first, then we can bring our own needs. God is concerned about our needs and knows them even before we mention them (Matthew 6:8). If this is the case, then why pray? Because prayer is the God-appointed way to have these needs met (see James 4:1–3). *Prayer prepares us for the proper use of the answer.* If we know our need, and if we voice it to God, trusting Him for His provision, then we will make better use of the answer than if God forced it on us without our asking.

It is right to pray for daily physical needs, for forgiveness, and for guidance and protection from evil. “Lead us not into temptation” does not mean that God tempts His children (James 1:13–17). In this petition we are asking God to guide us so that we will not get out of His will and get involved in a situation of temptation (1 John 5:18), or even in a situation of tempting God so that He must miraculously rescue us (Matthew 4:5–7).

We must pray, having a forgiving spirit toward others (vv. 14–15, *For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*). In this “appendix” to the prayer, Jesus expanded the last phrase of Matthew 6:12, “as we forgive our debtors.” He later repeated this lesson to His disciples (Mark 11:19–26). He was not teaching that believers earned God’s forgiveness by forgiving others; for this would be contrary to God’s free grace and mercy. However, if we have truly *experienced* God’s forgiveness, then we will have a readiness to forgive others (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13). Our Lord illustrated this principle in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18:21–35).

We have seen that true praying is a “family affair” (“Our Father”). If the members of the family are not getting along with one another, how can they claim to have a right relationship with the Father? The emphasis in 1 John 4 is that we show our love for God by loving our brothers. When we forgive each other, we are not *earning* the right to prayer; for the privilege of prayer is a part of our *sonship* (Rom. 8:15–16). Forgiveness belongs to the matter of *fellowship*: If I am not in fellowship with God, I cannot pray effectively. But fellowship with my brother helps to determine my fellowship with God; hence, forgiveness is important to prayer.

Since prayer involves glorifying God’s name, hastening the coming of God’s kingdom (2 Peter 3:12), and helping to accomplish God’s will on earth, the one praying must not have sin in his heart. If God answered the prayers of a believer who had an unforgiving spirit, He would dishonor His own name. How could God work through such a person to get His will done on earth? If God gave him his requests, He would be encouraging sin! The important thing about prayer is not simply getting an answer, but *being the kind of person whom God can trust with an answer.*

Our Fasting (Matthew 6:16–18, *And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*) The only fast that God actually required of the Jewish people was on the annual Day of Atonement (Lev. 23:27). The Pharisees fasted each Monday and Thursday (Luke

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18:12) and did so in such a way that people knew they were fasting. Their purpose, of course, was to win the praise of men. As a result, the Pharisees lost God's blessing.

It is not wrong to fast, if we do it in the right way and with the right motive. Jesus fasted (Matthew 4:3); so did the members of the early church (Acts 13:2). Fasting helps to discipline the appetites of the body (Luke 21:34) and keep our spiritual priorities straight. But fasting must never become an opportunity for temptation (1 Cor. 7:5). Simply to deprive ourselves of a natural benefit (such as food or sleep) is not *of itself* fasting. We must devote ourselves to God and worship Him. Unless there is the devotion of the heart (see Zech. 7) there is no lasting spiritual benefit.

As with giving and praying, true fasting must be done in secret; it is between the believer and God. To "make unsightly" our faces (by looking glum and asking for pity and praise) would be to destroy the very purpose of the fast. Our Lord here laid down a basic principle of spiritual living: Nothing that is truly spiritual will violate that which God has given us in nature. God usually does not tear down one good thing in order to build up another. If we have to look miserable to be considered spiritual, then there is something wrong with our views of spirituality.

Remember that *hypocrisy robs us of reality in Christian living*. We substitute reputation for character, mere words for true prayer, money for the devotion of the heart. No wonder Jesus compared the Pharisees to tombs that were whitewashed on the outside, but filthy on the inside! (Matthew 23:27–28)

But hypocrisy not only robs us of character, it also *robs us of spiritual rewards*. Instead of the eternal approval of God, we receive the shallow praise of men. We pray, but there are no answers. We fast, but the inner man shows no improvement. The spiritual life becomes hollow and lifeless. We miss the blessing of God here and now, and also lose the reward of God when Christ returns.

Hypocrisy also *robs us of spiritual influence*. The Pharisees were a negative influence; whatever they touched was defiled and destroyed. The people who admired them and obeyed the Pharisees' words thought they themselves were being helped, when in reality, they were being hurt.

The first step toward overcoming hypocrisy is to be honest with God in our secret life. We must never pray anything that we do not mean from the heart; otherwise, our prayers are simply empty words. Our motive must be to please God alone, no matter what men may say or do. We must cultivate the heart in the secret place. It has well been said, "The most important part of a Christian's life is the part that only God sees." When reputation becomes more important than character, we have become hypocrites.

Our Use of Wealth (Matthew 6:19–34)

We are accustomed to dividing life into the "spiritual" and the "material"; but Jesus made no such division. In many of His parables, He made it clear that a right attitude toward wealth is a mark of true spirituality (see Luke 12:13ff; 16:1–31). The Pharisees were covetous (Luke 16:14) and used religion to make money. If we have the true righteousness of Christ in our lives, then we will have a proper attitude toward material wealth.

Nowhere did Jesus magnify poverty or criticize the legitimate getting of wealth. God made all things, including food, clothing, and precious metals. God has declared that all things He has

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made are good (Gen. 1:31). God knows that we need certain things in order to live (Matthew 6:32). In fact, He has given us “richly all things to enjoy” (1 Tim. 6:17). It is not wrong to possess things, *but it is wrong for things to possess us*. The sin of idolatry is as dangerous as the sin of hypocrisy! There are many warnings in the Bible against covetousness (Ex. 20:17; Ps. 119:36; Mark 7:22; Luke 12:15ff; Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5).

Jesus warned against the sin of living for the things of this life. He pointed out the sad consequences of covetousness and idolatry.

Enslavement (vv. 19–24, *“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust[n] destroy and where thieves break in and steal,²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.²² “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light,²³ but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!²⁴ “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”*) Materialism will enslave the heart (Matthew 6:19–21), the mind (Matthew 6:22–23), and the will (Matthew 6:24). We can become shackled by the material things of life, but we ought to be liberated and controlled by the Spirit of God.

If the heart loves material things, and puts earthly gain above heavenly investments, then the result can only be a tragic loss. The treasures of earth may be used for God. But if we gather material things for ourselves, we will lose them; *and we will lose our hearts with them*. Instead of spiritual enrichment, we will experience impoverishment.

What does it mean to lay up treasures in heaven? It means to use *all that we have* for the glory of God. It means to “hang loose” when it comes to the material things of life. It also means measuring life by the true riches of the kingdom and not by the false riches of this world.

Wealth not only enslaves the heart, but it also enslaves the mind (Matthew 6:22–23). God’s Word often uses the eye to represent the attitudes of the mind. If the eye is properly focused on the light, the body can function properly in its movements. But if the eye is out of focus and seeing double, it results in unsteady movements. It is most difficult to make progress while trying to look in two directions at the same time.

If our aim in life is to get material gain, it will mean darkness within. But if our outlook is to serve and glorify God, there will be light within. If what should be light is really darkness, then we are being controlled by darkness; and outlook determines outcome.

Finally, materialism can enslave the will (Matthew 6:24). We cannot serve two masters simultaneously. Either Jesus Christ is our Lord, or money is our lord. It is a matter of the will. “But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare” (1 Tim. 6:9). If God grants riches, and we use them for His glory, then riches are a blessing. But if we *will* to get rich, and live with that outlook, we will pay a great price for those riches.

Devaluation (vv. 25–30, *“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?”²⁶ Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?²⁷ And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?²⁸ And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin,*

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²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?). Covetousness will not only cheapen our riches, but it will also cheapen us! We will start to become worried and anxious, and this anxiety is unnatural and unspiritual. The person who pursues money thinks that riches will solve his problems, when in reality, riches will create more problems! Material wealth gives a dangerous, false sense of security, and that feeling ends in tragedy. The birds and lilies do not fret and worry; yet they have God's wealth in ways that man cannot duplicate. All of nature depends on God, and God never fails. Only mortal man depends on money, and money always fails.

Jesus said that worry is sinful. We may dignify worry by calling it by some other name—concern, burden, a cross to bear—but the results are still the same. Instead of helping us live longer, anxiety only makes life shorter (Matthew 6:27). The Greek word translated *take no thought* literally means “to be drawn in different directions.” Worry pulls us apart. Until man interferes, everything in nature works together, because all of nature trusts God. Man, however, is pulled apart because he tries to live his own life by depending on material wealth.

God feeds the birds and clothes the lilies. He will feed and clothe us. It is our “little faith” that hinders Him from working as He would. He has great blessings for us if only we will yield to Him and live for the riches that last forever.

Loss of testimony (vv. 31–33, Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.) To worry about material things is to live like the heathen! If we put God's will and God's righteousness first in our lives, He will take care of everything else. What a testimony it is to the world when a Christian dares to practice Matthew 6:33! What a tragedy it is when so many of us *fail* to practice it.

Loss of joy today (v. 34, “Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.) Worrying about tomorrow does not help either tomorrow or today. If anything, it robs us of our effectiveness today—which means we will be even less effective tomorrow. Someone has said that the average person is crucifying himself between two thieves: the regrets of yesterday and the worries about tomorrow. It is right to plan for the future and even to save for the future (2 Cor. 12:14; 1 Tim. 5:8). But it is a sin to worry about the future and permit tomorrow to rob today of its blessings.

Three words in this section point the way to victory over worry: (1) *faith* (Matthew 6:30), trusting God to meet our needs; (2) *Father* (Matthew 6:32), knowing He cares for His children; and (3) *first* (Matthew 6:33), putting God's will first in our lives so that He might be glorified. If we have faith in our Father and put Him first, He will meet our needs.

Hypocrisy and anxiety are sins. If we practice the true righteousness of the kingdom, we will avoid these sins and live for God's glory

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THE KING'S PRINCIPLES: TRUE JUDGMENT

Matthew 7

The scribes and Pharisees were guilty of exercising a false judgment about themselves, other people, and even the Lord. Their false righteousness helped to encourage this false judgment. This explains why our Lord closed this important sermon with a discussion of judgment. In it He discussed three different judgments.

Our Judgment of Ourselves (Matthew 7:1–5)

The first principle of judgment is that we begin with ourselves. Jesus did not forbid us to judge others, for careful discrimination is essential in the Christian life. Christian love is not blind (Phil. 1:9–10). The person who believes all that he hears, and accepts everyone who claims to be spiritual will experience confusion and great spiritual loss. But before we judge others, we must judge ourselves. There are several reasons for this.

We shall be judged (v. 1, “Judge not, that you be not judged.”) The tense of the verb *judged* signifies a once-for-all final judgment. If we first judge ourselves, then we are preparing for that final judgment when we face God. The Pharisees “played God” as they condemned other people; but they never considered that God would one day judge them.

We are being judged (v. 2, For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.) The parallel passage in Luke 6:37–38 is helpful here. Not only will God judge us at the end, but people are also judging us right now; and we receive from people exactly what we give. The kind of judgment, and the measure of judgment, comes right back to us. We reap what we have sown.

We must see clearly to help others (vv. 3–5, Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? ⁴ Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? 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.) The purpose of self-judgment is to prepare us to serve others. Christians are obligated to help each other grow in grace. When we do not judge ourselves, we not only hurt ourselves, but we also hurt those to whom we could minister. The Pharisees judged and criticized *others* to make themselves look good (Luke 18:9–14). But Christians should judge *themselves* so that they can help others look good. There is a difference!

Let’s look at our Lord’s illustration of this point. Jesus chose the symbol of the eye because this is one of the most sensitive areas of the human body. The picture of a man with a two-by-four stuck in his eye, trying to remove a speck of dust from another man’s eye, is ridiculous indeed! If we do not honestly face up to our own sins, and confess them, we blind ourselves to ourselves; and then we cannot see clearly enough to help others. The Pharisees saw the sins of other people, but they would not look at their own sins.

In Matthew 6:22–23, Jesus used the illustration of the eye to teach us how to have a spiritual outlook on life. *We must not pass judgment on others’ motives.* We should examine their actions and attitudes, but we cannot judge their motives—for only God can see their hearts. It is possible for a person to do a good work with a bad motive. It is also possible to fail in a task and yet be

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very sincerely motivated. When we stand before Christ at the Judgment Seat, He will examine the secrets of the heart and reward us accordingly (Rom. 2:16; Col. 3:22–25).

The image of the eye teaches us another truth: We must exercise love and tenderness when we seek to help others (Eph. 4:15). I have had extensive eye examinations, and once had surgery to remove an imbedded speck of steel; and I appreciated the tenderness of the physicians. Like eye doctors, we should minister to people we want to help with tender loving care. We can do more damage than a speck of dirt in the eye if we approach others with impatience and insensitivity.

Two extremes must be avoided in this matter of spiritual self-examination. The first is the deception of a shallow examination. Sometimes we are so sure of ourselves that we fail to examine our hearts honestly and thoroughly. A quick glance into the mirror of the Word will never reveal the true situation (James 1:22–25).

The second extreme is what I call a “perpetual autopsy.” Sometimes we get so wrapped up in self-examination that we become unbalanced. But we should not look only at ourselves, or we will become discouraged and defeated. We should look by faith to Jesus Christ and let Him forgive and restore us. Satan is the accuser (Rev. 12:10), and he enjoys it when we accuse and condemn ourselves!

After we have judged ourselves honestly before God, and have removed those things that blind us, then we can help others and properly judge their works. But if we know there are sins in our lives, and we try to help others, we are hypocrites. In fact, it is possible for ministry to be a device to cover up sin! The Pharisees were guilty of this, and Jesus denounced them for it.

Our Judgment of Others (Matthew 7:6–20)

Christians must exercise discernment; for not everyone is a sheep. Some people are dogs or hogs, and some are wolves in sheep’s clothing! We are the Lord’s sheep, but this does not mean we should let people pull the wool over our eyes!

The reason we must judge (v. 6, “Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.”) As God’s people, we are privileged to handle the “holy things” of the Lord. He has entrusted to us the precious truths of the Word of God (2 Cor. 4:7), and we must regard them carefully. No dedicated priest would throw meat from the altar to a filthy dog, and only a fool would give pearls to a pig. While it is true that we must carry the Gospel “to every creature” (Mark 16:15), it is also true that we must not cheapen the Gospel by a ministry that lacks discernment. Even Jesus refused to talk to Herod (Luke 23:9), and Paul refused to argue with people who resisted the Word (Acts 13:44–49).

The reason for judgment, then, is not that we might condemn others, but that we might be able to minister to them. Notice that Jesus always dealt with individuals according to their needs and their spiritual condition. He did not have a memorized speech that He used with everybody. He discussed the new birth with Nicodemus, but He spoke of living water to the Samaritan woman. When the religious leaders tried to trap Him, He refused to answer their question (Matthew 21:23–27). It is a wise Christian who first assesses the condition of a person’s heart before sharing the precious pearls.

The resources God gives us (vv. 7–11, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.”⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds,

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and to the one who knocks it will be opened. ⁹ Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? ¹¹ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!). Why did our Lord discuss prayer at this point in His message? These verses seem to be an interruption, but they are not. You and I are human and fallible; we make mistakes. Only God can judge perfectly. Therefore, we must pray and seek His wisdom and direction. “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God” (James 1:5).

Young King Solomon knew that he lacked the needed wisdom to judge Israel, so he prayed to God; and the Lord graciously answered (1 Kings 3:3ff). If we are to have spiritual discernment, we must keep on asking God, keep on seeking His will, keep on knocking at the door that leads to greater ministry. God meets the needs of His children.

The guiding principle (v. 12, “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets). This is the so-called “Golden Rule,” one of the most misunderstood statements in the Bible. This statement is not the sum total of Christian truth, nor is it God’s plan of redemption. We should no more build our theology on the Golden Rule than we should build our astronomy on “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.”

This great truth is a principle that ought to govern our attitudes toward others. It only applies to believers, and it must be practiced in every area of life. *The person who practices the Golden Rule refuses to say or do anything that would harm himself or others.* If our judging of others is not governed by this principle, we will become proud and critical, and our own spiritual character will degenerate.

Practicing the Golden Rule releases the love of God in our lives and enables us to help others, even those who want to hurt us.

But remember that practicing the Golden Rule means paying a price. If we want God’s best for ourselves and others, but others resist God’s will, then they will oppose us. We are salt, and salt stings the open wound. We are light, and light exposes dirt.

The basis for judging (vv. 13–20). Since there are false prophets in the world, we must be careful of deception. But the greatest danger is *self-deception*. The scribes and Pharisees had fooled themselves into believing that they were righteous and others were sinful. It is possible for people to know the right language, believe intellectually the right doctrines, obey the right rules, and still not be saved. Jesus used two pictures to help us judge ourselves and others.

The two ways (vv. 13–14, “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy[q] that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. ¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few). These are, of course, the way to heaven and the way to hell. The broad way is the easy way; it is the popular way. But we must not judge spiritual profession by statistics; the majority is not always right. The fact that “everybody does it” is no proof that what they are doing is right.

Quite the contrary is true: God’s people have always been a remnant, a small minority in this world. The reason is not difficult to discover: The way of life is narrow, lonely, and costly. We can walk on the broad way and keep our “baggage” of sin and worldliness. But if we enter the narrow way, we must give up those things.

Here, then, is the first test: *Did your profession of faith in Christ cost you anything?* If not, then it was not a true profession. Many people who “trust” Jesus Christ never leave the broad road with its appetites and associations. They have an easy Christianity that makes no demands

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on them. Yet Jesus said that the narrow way was *hard*. We cannot walk on two roads, in two different directions, at the same time.

The two trees (vv. 15–20, *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”*¹⁶ *You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles?*¹⁷ *So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit.*¹⁸ *A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit.*¹⁹ *Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*²⁰ *Thus you will recognize them by their fruits*). These show that true faith in Christ changes the life and produces fruit for God’s glory. Everything in nature reproduces after its kind, and this is also true in the spiritual realm. Good fruit comes from a good tree, but bad fruit comes from a bad tree. The tree that produces rotten fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. “Wherefore, by their fruits you shall know them” (Matthew 7:20).

The second test is this: Did my decision for Christ change my life? False prophets who teach false doctrine can produce only a false righteousness (see Acts 20:29). Their fruit (the results of their ministry) is false and cannot last. The prophets themselves are false; the closer we get to them, the more we see the falsity of their lives and doctrines. They magnify themselves, not Jesus Christ; and their purpose is to exploit people, not to edify them. The person who believes false doctrine, or who follows a false prophet, will never experience a changed life. Unfortunately, some people do not realize this until it is too late.

God’s Judgment of Us (Matthew 7:21–29, *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”*²² *On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’*²³ *And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’*²⁴ *“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.”*²⁵ *And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.”*²⁶ *And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand.”*²⁷ *And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”*²⁸ *And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching,*²⁹ *for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.*)

From picturing two ways and two trees, our Lord closed His message by picturing *two builders and their houses*. The two ways illustrate the *start* of the life of faith; the two trees illustrate the *growth* and results of the life of faith here and now; and the two houses illustrate the *end* of this life of faith, when God shall call everything to judgment. There are false prophets at the gate that leads to the broad way, making it easy for people to enter. But at the end of the way, there is destruction. The final test is not what we think of ourselves, or what others may think. The final test is: *What will God say?*

How can we prepare for this judgment? By doing God’s will. Obedience to His will is the test of true faith in Christ. The test is not words, not saying “Lord, Lord,” and not obeying His commands. How easy it is to learn a religious vocabulary, and even memorize Bible verses and religious songs, and yet not obey God’s will. When a person is truly born again, he has the Spirit

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of God living within (Rom. 8:9); and the Spirit enables him to know and do the Father's will. God's love in his heart (Rom. 5:5) motivates him to obey God and serve others.

Words are not a substitute for obedience, and neither are religious works. Preaching, casting out demons, and performing miracles can be divinely inspired, but they give no assurance of salvation. It is likely that even Judas participated in some or all of these activities, and yet he was not a true believer. In the last days, Satan will use "lying wonders" to deceive people (2 Thess. 2:7–12).

We are to *hear* God's words and *do* them (see James 1:22–25). We must not stop with only hearing (or studying) His words. Our hearing must result in doing. This is what it means to build on the rock foundation. We should not confuse this symbol with the "rock" in 1 Corinthians 3:9ff. Paul founded the local church in Corinth on Jesus Christ when he preached the Gospel and won people to Christ. This is the only foundation for a local church.

The foundation in this parable is *obedience to God's Word—obedience that is an evidence of true faith* (James 2:14ff). The two men in this story had much in common. Both had desires to build a house. Both built houses that looked good and sturdy. But when the judgment came (the storm), one of the houses collapsed. What was the difference? Not the mere external looks, to be sure. The difference was in the foundation: The successful builder "dug deep" (Luke 6:48) and set his house on a solid foundation.

A false profession will last until judgment comes. Sometimes this judgment is in the form of the trials of life. Like the person who received the seed of God's Word into a shallow heart (Matthew 13:4–9), the commitment fails when the testing comes. Many people have professed faith in Christ, only to deny their faith when life becomes spiritually costly and difficult.

But the judgment illustrated here probably refers to the final judgment before God. We must not read into this parable all the doctrine that we are taught in the Epistles; for the Lord was illustrating one main point: *profession will ultimately be tested before God*. Those who have trusted Christ, and have proved their faith by their obedience will have nothing to fear. Their house is founded on the Rock, and it will stand. But those who have professed to trust Christ, yet who have not obeyed God's will, will be condemned.

How shall we test our profession of faith? By popularity? No, for there are many on the broad road to destruction. And there are many who are depending on words, saying "Lord, Lord"—but this is no assurance of salvation. Even religious activities in a church organization are no assurance. How then shall we judge ourselves and others who profess Christ as Saviour?

The two ways tell us to examine the cost of our profession. Have we paid a price to profess faith in Christ? *The two trees* tell us to investigate whether our lives have really changed. Are there godly fruits from our lives? And *the two houses* remind us that true faith in Christ will last, not only in the storms of life, but also in the final judgment.

The congregation was astonished at this sermon. Why? Because Jesus spoke with divine authority. The scribes and Pharisees spoke "from authorities," always quoting the various rabbis and experts of the Law. Jesus needed no human teacher to add authority to His words; for He spoke as the Son of God. We cannot lightly dismiss this sermon, for it is God who gave it to us! We must either bow before Him and submit to His authority, or we will be condemned.¹

¹ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). [*The Bible exposition commentary*](#) (Vol. 1, pp. 20–32). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Sermon on the Mount Overview

The Sermon on the Mount

5:1 Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.

2 And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

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

4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

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

6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

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

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

9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

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

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

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

Sermon on the Mount Overview

5:21 “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ 22 But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire. 23 So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. 25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. 26 Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

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

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

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

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

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

6:1 “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

Sermon on the Mount Overview

6:2 “Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

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

7 “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. 9 Pray then like this:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

10

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

11

Give us this day our daily bread,

12

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

13

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

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

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

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

Sermon on the Mount Overview

6:22 “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, 23 but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

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

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

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

7:1 “Judge not, that you be not judged. 2 For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. 3 Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? 4 Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? 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.

6 “Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.

7 “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. 9 Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? 11 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

12 “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

Sermon on the Mount Overview

7:13 “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy[q] that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. 14 For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

15 “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 16 You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? 17 So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. 18 A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

21 “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ 23 And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’

24 “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. 25 And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. 26 And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. 27 And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

28 And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, 29 for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.