

Introduction

“The First Christian Retreat”

(Matthew 4:23-5:1)

MINI BIBLE COLLEGE

BOOKLET Thirty-Three

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

VERSE BY VERSE

(Matthew 5, 6, and 7)

Many who do not even pretend to be Christ followers will give verbal approval to the teachings of Jesus Christ found in the “Sermon on the Mount”. Intellectuals, politicians, and poets through the ages have quoted portions of His teaching without ever knowing the One Who preached that sermon. Perhaps there is no passage in the Bible that is quoted more and understood less than this discourse of Jesus we are going to study now.

The Context of the Sermon on the Mount

It is important to see the context before we consider the content of this great discourse. We find Matthew’s description of the context in which this sermon was preached when we read:

“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about Him spread all over Syria, and people brought to Him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and He healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, from the Ten Cities, from Jerusalem, from Judea and the region across the Jordan followed Him.

“And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying...” (Matthew 4:23-5:1)

Then we read the fifth, sixth and seventh chapters of the Gospel of Matthew, which record this profound teaching Jesus gave in that setting. Do you appreciate the context in which this great teaching was given? I call it “The First Christian Retreat”. This was not really a sermon as we think of sermons today but a teaching given by Jesus in what we might consider a retreat setting on the top of a mountain.

When Jesus had finished His three years of public ministry, He spent His last hours secluded in an upper room with the apostles He recruited and apprenticed before He was arrested and died on the cross. He shared His longest recorded discourse with them in that setting. I call that discourse “The Last Christian Retreat” that Jesus had with His disciples. (John 13-16)

I have quoted Matthew’s description of the setting for this First Christian Retreat. Jesus was healing every imaginable sickness among those people who were gathered around the slopes of the Sea of Galilee. According to Matthew, they “... Were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and He healed them.” (Mathew 4:24)

We read that those who gathered around the Sea of Galilee had traveled “... from the Ten Cities, from Jerusalem, from Judea

and the region across the Jordan.” (25) It took about four days to walk from across the Jordan to Galilee, where Jesus was healing these sick people.

Today in many of our cultures we institutionalize these problems: the sick and dying, those who are mentally ill, the elderly and the veterans of our wars are out of sight and often out of our minds. When Jesus organized His retreat, all the problems I have profiled were there in the multitude that was gathered around the Sea of Galilee.

If you earn degrees or attend seminars on how to be an effective executive, you will be told that to be an effective executive you must learn to analyze, organize, deputize, supervise, and then agonize!

Jesus chose not to minister healing to all those people. He invited some of His disciples to meet with Him on a higher level near the top of the hills that gradually rise from the Sea of Galilee (Mark 3:13). That divided the multitude into two groups; at the bottom of the mountain were those who were part of the problem. At a higher level of the mountain with Jesus were those who wanted to be part of His solution to all the problems at the bottom of the mountain.

Jesus realized that since He had accepted the limitations of a human body and the short time He had here on earth, He could never solve all those problems Himself. He therefore “analyzed”, although we know that it was in His plan from the beginning to use frail humans as part of His Master Plan. Then He organized this First

Christian Retreat. Mark writes that Jesus personally invited those who attended this retreat, “To be with Him and then to send them out.” (Mark 3:13, 14)

By the way Jesus organized this retreat, the challenge He was presenting was, “Are you part of the problem or part of the solution?” The strategy of Jesus was to show those who attended His retreat how they could be part of the solution to all those problems of life represented by those at the bottom of the mountain.

John makes a slight reference to the context of this retreat. He writes that when great multitudes were coming to Jesus for healing, Jesus sat on a hill with His disciples (John 6:1-3). John wrote his Gospel many decades after the Gospels of Matthew and Mark were written. He was probably aware of what Matthew had written, yet he had other priorities so he did not elaborate on the setting for this discourse. It is Matthew who gives us the most details regarding the context and the content of the Sermon on the Mount.

One scholar summarizes the context in which this great teaching was given, by telling us that Jesus is presenting three profound truths as He creates the setting for this great sermon. When Jesus calls disciples out of that multitude to be part of His solution, we see the crisis involved in becoming a Christian. The eight beatitudes are the sermon and profile the character involved in being Christian. The four metaphors, which follow the beatitudes, and all the rest of this teaching in chapters five, six and seven represent the challenge involved when Christian character impacts a

pagan culture.

With this brief introduction it is my prayer that together we will get into God’s Word and allow His Word to get into us. I invite you to study this Sermon on the Mount because I am sure it will change your life as it did those that heard it that day and then went on to turn their world up-side down.

Chapter One

The Content of the Sermon on the Mount

“The Coming Attitudes”

(Matthew 5:3-6)

Jesus Christ preached this sermon on a mountaintop in Galilee in which He challenged people who professed to be His disciples to be strategically placed between the love of God and the pain of the hurting people in this world. He challenged His disciples to partner with Him and be conduits of His love. He concluded His sermon with an awesome call to commitment. Then He appointed twelve men who heard His sermon to be His “apostles” or “sent ones”. Those apostles lived and died for Jesus as they made disciples for Him all over the world.

Now that we have considered the context we are ready to consider the content of this great sermon. We read: “Then He

opened His mouth and taught them, saying, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.’ (5:3-6)

Jesus begins by teaching His disciples eight attitudes – called, the “beatitudes”, or “blessed attitudes” because each one is introduced by the word “blessed”. Jesus is promising to bless the disciple who has each of these attitudes. This word “blessed” can actually mean “happy”, “spiritually prosperous”, or “in a state of grace”. Each attitude also includes a promise that describes the form in which this blessing will come into the life of that disciple.

These eight blessed attitudes profile the mind-set of a disciple of Jesus. The context in which He teaches these attitudes makes the statement that this outlook on life will make His disciples part of the solution and answer of Christ to all the suffering in the world that is represented by the multitude at the bottom of the mountain.

As disciples of Jesus, when we decide we want to be part of the solution and no longer part of the problem, the first thing we should do is study these attitudes until we understand them and then make the commitment to live them every day of our lives. Remember - as we learned from the context of this sermon - the beatitudes actually are the sermon. The rest of His teaching is the application of His sermon - or of these attitudes.

Later in this discourse Jesus will teach that right attitudes are the difference between a life filled with light (purity, truth, and happiness), and a life filled with darkness, or unhappiness (Matthew 6:22, 23). He adds the commentary that when our lives are filled with darkness because we have the wrong attitudes, it can be very, very dark, and our unhappiness can be very great.

We might add that when people like Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, or other evil leaders practice genocide because they have the wrong mindset, that can bring great darkness into the lives of millions of people. That is why Jesus preached and applied at His first retreat what we might call, “A Checkup from the Neck up.”

The Coming Attitudes

The eight beatitudes divide into two sets of four attitudes. Throughout the Scripture, there is a pattern that emerges when God is recruiting leaders for His work. Those leaders have what we might call, “coming experiences” and then “going experiences”. They have a meaningful coming to God before they have a fruitful going for God. The first four beatitudes present the attitudes involved in coming to God, and the second four beatitudes profile the attitudes involved in going for God.

Some things like talent can be developed in solitude, but character must be developed in the stream of humanity, or while we are in relationships with people. The first four beatitudes are developed on the mountaintop, or in what Jesus will describe later as our “closet” or in our private experiences with God (Matthew 6:6).

We learn and cultivate the first four beatitudes in our private relationship with God, but the second set of four beatitudes must be learned and developed when we are in our relationships with people.

Poor in Spirit

The first beatitude is, “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:3) This first blessed attitude relates to that question the religious leaders asked John the Baptist: “What do you say about yourself?” (John 1:22) Without the correct attitude toward ourselves we will never be one of our Lord’s solutions.

The promise that describes the blessing this beatitude brings into the life of a disciple simply means we have personally made Jesus Christ our Savior, Lord and King. Being part of the kingdom of heaven is another way of saying we are subjects of the King of kings and Lord of lords - the One Who is the Solution. This is the first attitude we must have if we are going to be part of the solution to human need Christ wants to bring to the hurting people of this world through His disciples.

Scholars tell us the words “poor in spirit” can also be translated as “broken in spirit.” That means this attitude is describing brokenness - which is something we see in the lives of those God calls and equips for special ministry. As you read the Bible, observe how God teaches this first blessed attitude to those He is calling to do great works for His glory. For example, Jacob experienced

brokenness when he wrestled all night with an angel. (Genesis 32:24-32)

People like Jacob, Moses and the Apostle Peter had to learn three lessons while God was making them poor in spirit: They learned that they were nobody; they learned that they were somebody, and then they learned what God can do with somebody who has learned that he is nobody. A popular paraphrase of this first beatitude Jesus taught reads: “You are blessed when you are at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and His rule.” (5:3)

In one word, the state of grace Jesus described as poor in spirit is humility. Humility is a difficult concept to understand. If you think you are humble, you are probably not humble. A church gave their pastor a humility medal but they took it back because he wore it every Sunday! We show that we understand humility when we pray: “God, I am not the solution. I cannot even solve my own problems and I certainly cannot solve the problems of other people. But, I now know that You can! You are their Solution. If You are in me, and I am in relationship with You, then I have the potential for being a vehicle and a channel of Your solution and Your answer as I relate to people and their problems.”

Those Who Mourn

The second blessed attitude is: “Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.” (5:4) Jesus is giving us a lesson in

values. Do we consider ourselves to be blessed when we are mourning? Yet, Jesus clearly promises us a special blessing and comfort in our times of mourning. He is actually making the values declaration that those who mourn are blessed!

Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, agreed with Jesus when he wrote: “It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for that is the end of all men; and the living will take it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by a sad countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. ... “In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider: surely God has appointed the one as well as the other.” (Ecclesiastes 7:2-4, 14)

In other words, “Blessed are those who mourn.” Solomon is writing that it is a solemn experience for us when we go to a funeral and look at the body of someone we love or know who has departed this life. We are deeply moved because we know it is not a matter of if, but when our body will be the one that is about to be buried. Solomon is declaring that our value system is more in alignment with the eternal values God wants to teach us when we are at a funeral. So, it is better to go to a funeral than to a party.

Believers sometimes have the misguided conviction that if they show signs of mourning the loss of a loved one their faith is weak. Jesus attended the funeral of someone He loved and wept so much they exclaimed, “Behold how He loved him!” (John 11:35, 36)

A preliminary interpretation and application of this second beatitude is that we should never suppress our grief.

Paul wrote that when we lose loved ones who are believers we should not sorrow as unbelievers do who have no hope of seeing a lost loved one again (1 Thessalonians 4:13). When David lost a child, he expressed the hope and grief of godly mourning when he said, “I will go to him, but he will not return to me.” (2 Samuel 12:23) Our hope is that we will see that loved one who has also come to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior in heaven. However, our legitimate mourning is based on the undeniable reality that we will spend the rest of our lifetime without that loved one.

If we want to discover the blessing and comfort Jesus promised us in our experience of mourning, we must let God use our mourning to move us in three ways: First of all, we should let our mourning bring us to the place where we ask the right questions - perhaps for the first time in our lives – we should ask the right questions. Many people go through life and never ask the right questions. However, there are questions God wants us to ask when we are mourning.

Job is a good example of this. He lost ten children, every possession he had and then he lost his health. Throughout Job’s experience of suffering great loss, he allowed his mourning to bring him to the place where he asked the right questions. He asked great questions like: A man dies. He lies prostrate. His spirit leaves him. He expires - and then where is he? If a man die, shall he live again?”

(Job 14:10-14) These are examples of the right questions God wants us to ask.

The second way God wants to move us when we are mourning is that He would like our mourning to bring us to the place where we listen to His answers to the right questions. Job got a great answer to his question in the worst part of his suffering when he received a Messianic revelation. He cried, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that He shall stand at last upon the earth.” (Job 19:25)

God may not give us supernatural revelations as He did Job, but the Bible is filled with His answers to those right questions. My favorite Psalm is the Shepherd Psalm of David (Psalm 23) where I find many answers.

Jesus gave us a great answer when He attended that funeral where He wept so much. At a graveside He challenged a loved one who was also mourning with these words: “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25, 26)

The question of Jesus at the end of that graveside challenge leads to the third way God would like to move us toward the blessing promised by Jesus when we are mourning: If we want to discover the blessing and the comfort Jesus promised to those who mourn, we should let our mourning bring us to the place where we believe and trust God’s answers to the right questions.

When we believe God’s answers to the right questions, we will make the discovery that the blessing and comfort Jesus promised mourners is what the Bible calls “salvation”. This word simply means “deliverance”. We can experience the initial deliverance of salvation or the deliverance we need from grief and depression. We can have the most important experiences of our lives when our mourning moves us to ask, listen and believe.

The context of this teaching reveals another interpretation and application of this second beatitude. The strategy of Jesus at this retreat is: “Look down the mountain. Do you see all those people down there? Those people are hurting. Do you honestly think you can go down there and be part of their solution and part of the answer to their tragic problems and never hurt yourself?” The word “compassion” means “to feel with”. How can you feel with hurting people if you never hurt?

Somebody has said, “An evangelist is one beggar telling another beggar where the bread is.” A wounded healer, who has hurt and been comforted by God is, “One hurting heart telling another hurting heart Who and where the Comforter is.” Many people will tell you they believed in God and knew about God, but they did not know God until they experienced a level of suffering only God could comfort. When they were driven to discover the Comforter, they established a relationship with God.

A popular paraphrase eloquently expresses this second beatitude: “You are blessed when you feel you have lost what is most

dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One (Who is) most dear to you.” (Matthew 5:4 The Message)

We discover yet another insight into this second beatitude when we couple it with the first beatitude. We often mourn while we are learning that we are poor in spirit. The fear of failure haunts and drives many people because it is so painful to fail. We mourn when we fail. But personal failure is actually God’s favorite tool for convincing us that we can do nothing without Him. Moses and Peter were mourning painful experiences of failure while they were learning that they were poor in spirit before God could use them mightily.

The Meek

The next blessed attitude Jesus brings before us has to do with what we want: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” What is meekness? Meekness is perhaps the most misunderstood and misapplied of these eight beautiful attitudes. Meekness is not weakness. We hear Jesus say, “I am meek.” (Matthew 11:29) When you get to know the Jesus Christ of the Scripture, you realize that He was not meek in the sense that He was a mild and a weak man.

The Old Testament describes Moses as the meekest man who ever lived (Numbers 12:3). As you read the Old Testament and get to know Moses, does he impress you as a weak man? Jesus was not weak and Moses was not weak because they were meek.

We can gain insight into the meaning of the biblical word “meek” if we think of a powerful horse that is unbroken. It is a very strong animal and it is strong-willed. People who are experts at this sort of thing will slowly slip a bridle over the head of that horse, carefully placing the bit in that horse’s mouth. They then strap a saddle on the horse’s back. When they finally reach the point where the horse takes the bit and accepts the control of the bit, the bridle and the person sitting in the saddle - when the horse’s will is broken or tamed, that horse is still powerful, but it is now meek.

When Saul of Tarsus met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus this would be a paraphrase of what the Lord asked Saul: “Why are you persecuting Me? Why are you pulling against the bit? It is so hard on you.” (Acts 9:4, 5)

But when Saul of Tarsus asked that question, “Lord, what will You have me to do?” he had accepted the control of the bit, which along with other things, was the will of the risen Christ for his life. That is when Saul of Tarsus became meek and that is precisely what meekness is.

Jesus made the declaration, “I am meek” while He was giving one of His greatest invitations: “Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am meek and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

The original language in which this invitation is recorded indicates that these words were addressed to people who were working to the point of exhaustion to manage their very heavy burdens.

In His invitation Jesus invites people with heavy burdens to come learn about His burden, His heart and His Yoke. He wants them to learn that His burden is light. (This is amazing since He literally had the world on His shoulders.) He wants them to learn that His heart is humble and meek and He wants to teach them that it is His Yoke that makes His burden light and His life easy.

A yoke is not a burden. A yoke is an instrument that makes it possible for an animal like an ox to move a heavy burden. Many of us have seen ox carts piled high with burdens that are being pulled by an ox. It is the ox yoke that makes it possible for that very strong animal to have its strength controlled in such a way that with ease the ox moves that enormous burden.

This simple and profound metaphor defines meekness. The third beatitude of meekness is strength under control. Essentially, Jesus is teaching: I take the Yoke of my Father's will upon Me every day." Remember that He said, "I do always the things that please the Father." (John 8:29) That was the yoke Jesus wore. He submitted to the yoke of the Father and He was one hundred percent controlled by the Father one hundred percent of the time. That is the beatitude of meekness Jesus is teaching His disciples.

A yoke that fit well, and that was smoothly rubbed out by a good carpenter, made the animal's life easy; it made its burden seem light. A carpenter like Jesus would have made yokes that fit very well, that would be smooth inside so they would not irritate the animal. Jesus teaches the beatitude of meekness because He knows the Yoke He wears every day will make the burdens light and life easy for those who are struggling because they have no yoke.

When He teaches the third Beatitude, Jesus is essentially saying: "There is a right way to live your life. If you will live life as I do, you will find that you will not be burdened, weary, and working to the point of exhaustion to manage your problems." He was really saying, "Take life as I take it. If you accept My Yoke of meekness, you will discover that it can make your burden light and it can make your life easy no matter how great your challenges may be.

In summary, He is essentially teaching the people on the mountaintop: "Those people down there are suffering because they do not know how to pull the load of life. They are not able to move the burdens because they have no Yoke. But if you will confess My values, live your life with My attitudes, and be trained by the spiritual disciplines I will show you as you follow Me, you will learn something about My burden, My heart and My Yoke that will give you rest in your soul."

Meekness is the discipline of our want to, or our will. The word "disciple" and the word "discipline" come from the same root word. The promise of Jesus that accompanies this blessed attitude is

that the meek disciple will inherit the earth. This simply means two things: (1) We should expect a disciple of Jesus to be a disciplined person, and (2) the disciplined disciple of Jesus gains everything when they have the Yoke of Jesus and His Father on their life all day long every day.

Those Who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness

The fourth blessed attitude is: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be filled.” (Matthew 5:6) When we are meek, or we can say that Jesus is our Lord and we are submitting our life to His control, Jesus teaches that we should now hunger and thirst after righteousness.

We now see a pattern emerging that the beatitudes come in pairs, or couplets. We mourn while we are learning to be poor in spirit and when we become meek we will hunger and thirst for righteousness. Righteousness is simply rightness or doing what is right. To hunger and thirst after righteousness is to hunger and thirst to know what is right - especially to know what is right for you.

As soon as Paul became meek on the Road to Damascus, he wanted to know what was right for him. When he called Jesus “Lord” and asked what his Lord wanted him to do, he was not only illustrating meekness. He was also illustrating what it means to have a hunger and a thirst for righteousness.

The explanation of the righteous indignation, or anger of Jesus we read about in the Gospels is that what the religious leaders

were doing to the Temple of God was contrary to what was right. Observe the passion of Jesus to do the will of His Father. Then realize that a passion for doing what is right includes a passion for confronting and putting right what is clearly wrong.

In this Sermon on the Mount, observe the emphasis of Jesus on the vital importance of righteousness: The last Beatitude is, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:10). Two of the eight Beatitudes are about rightness. Later in this chapter He teaches: “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (5:20) Also at the beginning of the sixth chapter He teaches: “Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen of men.” In the second half of the sixth chapter He teaches values. He reaches the conclusion of His teaching about values when He prescribes the number-one priority value: “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness ...” (6:33)

The promise that accompanies this Beatitude is that the disciple will be filled full of the righteousness for which they hunger and thirst. The original Greek language suggests the idea that they will be so filled with righteousness they will choke. This also means they will be filled completely with the Holy Spirit of God, Who is Righteousness and they will be filled with a hunger and thirst to know what He wants them to do.

Make the observation that the Beatitude here is not “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after happiness for they shall be made very happy.” It is not, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for fulfillment.” It is not, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after prosperity, for they shall be very prosperous.” That is not what is promised here. The beatitude is, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness.” And the promise is that they shall be filled full of rightness and a passion to do what is right.

Great champions who have addressed injustice - like those who accomplished the abolition of slavery – were devout disciples of Jesus Christ. With a hunger and thirst for that which was right they also had a passion for attacking what was not right. Nobel Peace Prize winners, like Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela demonstrated their hunger and thirst for righteousness by peacefully crying out against the injustice of racism. If you trace the word “righteousness” through the Bible, you will see that Jesus was being consistent with Scripture when He emphasized the concept that the disciple who is filled with righteousness confronts unrighteousness.

One of my favorite righteousness verses is: “Offer the sacrifices of righteousness and put your trust in the Lord.” (Psalm 4:5) The Psalmist is not able to sleep because he is a spiritual man who is doing what is expedient rather than what is right. He resolves that he is going to make whatever sacrifices he must to do what is right. Only then he experiences peace and restfully sleeps. His motivation for this decision is that he knows he surrounded by people

who are looking for something good. They are looking for someone who will do what is right rather than what is expedient.

As Jesus emphasizes the personal integrity and righteousness of His disciples, He is making the statement that one reason why those people at the bottom of the mountain are miserable and unhappy is because they are doing what nearly everybody else does. They are doing that which is expedient rather than that which is right.

Another verse I must reference from dozens of verses about righteousness declares that the people of God are to be called “Trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He might be glorified”. (Isaiah 61:3)

It is the plan of God - and therefore the strategy of Jesus at this retreat - to recruit disciples who will be conduits of rightness as they return to that multitude of people at the foot of the mountain who represent the lost people of this world. His design is that His disciples should be planted in this world like trees of righteousness to the glory of God.

Chapter Two

“The Going Attitudes”

(Matthew 5:7-12)

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:7-12)

Climbing the Mountain

One of my favorite scholars writes that the beatitudes are like climbing a mountain: The first two - being poor in spirit and mourning - take us half way up the mountain. Meekness takes us three fourths of the way, while hungering, thirsting and being filled with righteousness takes us to the top of the mountain. In other words, we climb the mountain while we are learning the coming attitudes.

When a disciple learns the attitudes that lead to the top of the mountain, what kind of person will they be before they begin their descent down the other side of the mountain and learn the going

attitudes Christ wants to teach them? Because they have been filled with righteousness, are they like the Pharisees? Do they look down on people and quote chapters and verses that condemn the behavior of those they know? The going attitudes will answer these questions.

The Merciful

The fifth blessed attitude is, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.” (7) The word “mercy” means, “unconditional love.” When David writes that the mercy of God will follow him all the days of his life, the word “follow” is actually “pursue.” David is convinced that the unconditional love of God will pursue him all the days of his life (Psalm 23:6).

When all the horrors of the Babylonian conquest of the Jews had taken place, Jeremiah wrote his Lamentations. While he was writing, he had a revelation. God essentially made him know, “I never stop loving My people, Jeremiah!” He then wrote that the mercies and compassions of God are renewed every morning (Lamentations 3:22-23).

The first verse of the prophecy of Malachi is: “The word of the Lord through Malachi: ‘I love you says the Lord!’” The entire message of the prophet Hosea is the unconditional love of God. God has always loved and He is unconditional love (I John 4:16). The mercy of God withholds from us what we deserve because of our sins, and the grace of God lavishes on us all kinds of blessings we do

not deserve. A good paraphrase of this beatitude would be “Blessed are the people who are filled full of the unconditional love of God”.

It is so wonderful to realize that this word “mercy” is found 366 times in the Bible because God knew we would need it every day with an extra day for leap years. Two hundred and eighty of those references to the mercy of God are found in the Old Testament. God has always been a God of unconditional love.

The promise of Jesus to the merciful is that “They shall obtain mercy,” not only means they will receive mercy from God and those to whom they show mercy, it means they will become channels of God’s unconditional love to people who need to be loved unconditionally.

If we are going to go down from the mountaintop and be part of Christ’s solution to those who hurt, we must be filled with the unconditional love of God. Those disciples who are the solutions and answers of Jesus are not self-righteous Pharisees, but conduits of the unconditional love of God and of Christ. To be filled with righteousness is to be filled with the love of God, according to Jesus.

The Pure in Heart

When we love, we often love with a selfish motive. That is why the next beatitude is, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” (8) When the follower of Christ loves, it is not because they have a selfish personal need they are fulfilling. They

love because they are filled with the love of the risen, living Christ and their motives are pure.

The word “pure” in this beatitude is actually a Greek word from which we get our word for “catheterized”. The word is translated as “cleanse” when James uses the same word. (James 4:8) The essence of this beatitude is that when the disciple loves with the unconditional love of God, any selfish motives will be catheterized out of his or her heart. By personal application, we should pray every day that if there is anything but the love of Christ in our hearts the Holy Spirit will catheterize our hearts.

When we do something good for people, they will immediately question our motives. But the merciful disciple of Jesus can say to those they love: “I want nothing from you except the privilege of loving you with the love of Christ.”

The promise of Jesus to the pure in heart is that they will see God. Conduits of the love of Christ with pure motives see God as they channel all the love Christ is which is applied to all the pain of the hurting people of this world. As the love of God flows through them, they live in God and God lives in them, according to the Apostle of love (1 John 4:16).

The Peacemakers

The seventh beatitude is: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” The essence of this attitude is that the disciple who is a solution and an answer of Jesus is a minister of reconciliation. One of the sources of the terrible problems at the

bottom of the mountain is alienation. People are alienated from God, from others and even from themselves. Jesus is challenging His disciples to learn and acquire the dynamic attitudes that will give them the experience of reconciliation in these three directions and then become ministers of reconciliation when they return to the multitude.

Paul writes that every believer who has experienced the miracle of reconciliation with God through Christ is commissioned with the message and the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:14-6:2). Based on that passage, a theologian has written: "It is the will of the Reconciler that the reconciled should be the agents of reconciliation in the lives of those who have not been reconciled." That is the essence of the strategy of Jesus as He teaches the seventh beatitude.

During the cold war a surgeon in one of the terrible slave labor camps in Siberia became a believer. Having trusted Jesus to be his Savior and Lord, this Jewish surgeon named Boris Kornfeld determined that he was going to become a minister of reconciliation in that terrible place. He performed surgery on a patient whom he introduced to Christ after the surgery. For his courageous act, he was murdered in his bed that night. His patient recovered and eventually told the entire world about the horrors of the slave camps. His name was Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

That surgeon and dedicated disciple had no way of knowing that his patient would be famous and write many wonderful books.

He was simply doing what Jesus taught when He gave the seventh beatitude. The promise of Jesus to these ministers of reconciliation is that they shall be called the sons of God. God only had one Son and He was a missionary. Small wonder then that God would consider those who are His sent ones as His sons. Of course, this is generic and means they are considered children, sons and daughters, of God.

The Persecuted

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." I said that these Beatitudes come in couplets, and they do. The seventh beatitude is coupled with the eighth one.

Boris Kornfeld gave his life to become an agent of reconciliation for Alexander Solzhenitsyn. That has been the experience of the ministers of reconciliation throughout church history. That is why the seventh Beatitude is essentially "Blessed are the agents of reconciliation," and the eighth Beatitude is, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Those who are persecuted because they are the ministers of reconciliation are truly acknowledging the rule of the King over their hearts even if it costs them their lives.

Make the observation that it is not merely "Blessed are the persecuted," for simply any reason - especially because of things they bring on themselves. But it is "Blessed are the persecuted for righteousness' sake." Because they shared the Gospel - because they

identified themselves with Jesus Christ they will be persecuted. You can see why these last two beatitudes are coupled together.

Ministers of reconciliation get persecuted because they are strategically placed, at the center of the conflict and alienation. They go where the alienated people are fighting each other. Think of the hot spots in the world, like the Middle East, or any other place where there is severe conflict. Ministers of reconciliation go there and that is a place of great danger.

Jesus teaches these eight beautiful attitudes and then, beginning at verse eleven, He begins to apply them. Observe the pronouns in the eight Beatitudes - Blessed are those, blessed are they. They are general and impersonal. But, beginning with verse eleven He says, "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you because of Me."

He is turning to those sitting around Him and He is making the message personal now. He is applying this prediction of persecution. The application of the eight beatitudes begins here and the teaching of these Beatitudes will now be applied throughout the rest of this teaching.

We would think that if there were people with these beautiful attitudes in our world today they would be applauded by this world. However, these final beatitudes tell us that for all His blessed attitudes the disciple of Jesus Christ is persecuted. Why?

The answer to that question is that the disciple with these attitudes confronts people with a model of what they should be.

When the people in this world are confronted by the life of a disciple with these attitudes, they have two choices: they can acknowledge this model of how they should live, and they can desire the blessed attitudes that make them the way they are. Or, they can attack the disciple who is modeling the mindset and values of Jesus Christ. For more than two thousand years the Godless world has been exercising that second option.

Summary Observations of the Eight Beatitudes

These eight blessed attitudes are the sermon, and all the rest of this teaching is His application of the sermon. The context of this sermon presents Matthew's version of the crisis involved in becoming a Christian. According to Matthew, becoming a Christian is not a matter of what Jesus is going to do for you. The emphasis is, "What are you going to do for Jesus? Are you part of the problem or part of the solution of Jesus? Are you one of His answers or are you merely another question mark?"

The blessed attitudes present the character involved in being Christian. The four metaphors - salt, light, city, and candle - that follow the beatitudes, introduce the challenge involved when Christian character impacts secular culture.

It is as if there is an imaginary "spiritual equator" between the fourth and fifth beatitudes. These eight beatitudes divide into two sets of four attitudes. The first four beatitudes are the attitudes involved in coming to Christ, and the second four beatitudes profile

the attitudes involved in going for Christ. The first four beatitudes are developed on the mountaintop, or in our individual relationship with God and Christ, but the second four beatitudes must be learned and developed in our relationships with people.

The beatitudes also divide into four sets of couplets: the poor in spirit who mourn; the meek who hunger and thirst after righteousness; the merciful who have a pure heart, and the peacemakers who are persecuted.

Each beatitude couplet profiles a spiritual secret that must be learned by a disciple of Jesus before they can be part of His solution and one of His answers. The first two beatitudes – being poor in spirit and mourning - profile this insight: “It is not a matter of what I can do, but of what He can do.”

The second couplet - meekness and hungering for righteousness - profiles this spiritual secret: “It is not a matter of what I want, but of what He wants.” The third couplet - the merciful with a pure heart - represents this spiritual secret: “It is not a matter of who or what I am, but of Who and what He is.”

The fourth couplet - peacemakers who get persecuted - focuses the spiritual secret, which we must confess when Christ uses us, that “It was not anything I did, but what He did.” The Apostle Paul writes the Corinthians that when he had his dynamic ministry in their city, nothing coming from him and everything was coming from God (2 Corinthians 3:5).

This word “blessed” is a word that should be defined. In some translations it is translated “happy”. This parallels the joy, which is the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22, 23). This blessed joy can be paraphrased as the happiness that does not make good sense because it comes from the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives and is not controlled by circumstances.

“Spiritually prosperous” is another way this word “blessed” has been translated. To be spiritually prosperous does not mean economic wealth. If economic prosperity is the definition of what it means to be blessed, then none of the apostles were blessed. Because they lived these beatitudes of Jesus, they were not rich when they died horrible deaths.

Chapter Three

“A Turtle on a Fence Post”

(Matthew 5:13-16)

Jesus followed His profile of Christ-like character with four profound metaphors that show us what happens when the character He profiled by His beatitudes impacts pagan culture. He taught: “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. You are the light of the world. A city

that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lamp stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:13-16)

The Salt of the Earth

With these four metaphors Jesus begins the application section of this great sermon. The first metaphor is that a disciple with these attitudes is the salt of the earth. The original language is literally “You and you alone are the salt of the earth.”

One interpretation and application of this metaphor is based on the fact that in Jesus’ day there was no refrigeration. The only way people could preserve fish or other meat was to rub salt into it. Jesus was then making a declaration about His disciples and about the world, saying the world is rotting like spoiled meat and His disciples were salt the world needed to be preserved from moral corruption. The only way His disciples could preserve the world from corruption was for those disciples to be “rubbed into” the people of this world. The “salt” influence of Christian character will then preserve the world from moral corruption.

Another interpretation and application of what Jesus meant when He used the salt of the earth metaphor is based on the fact that the word “salary” comes from the words “salt money”. Those words go back to the days of the Roman Empire. The Romans knew that no

living organism can live without salt. They therefore controlled the salt of the world. They paid their slaves with cubes of salt.

Jesus was then saying to His disciples, “Those people down there at the bottom of the mountain do not have life. If you understand, believe and apply what I have profiled by these eight beautiful attitudes, then you will have life and you will be the source from which those people will find, preserve, and bring out the best in life. Therefore, you are the only chance those people have of finding life.”

As in all the inspired metaphors of Jesus profound applications are many as you reflect and meditate upon them. Salt makes people thirsty and the disciple makes secular people thirsty for what he has discovered in Christ. Salt irritates when it gets into the open sores of sinful people. In the same way the life of a disciple of Jesus is irritating when it is lived next to the life of a sinner. Salt has a cleansing and a healing quality and the disciple who lives the beatitudes Jesus taught has those positive influences on the lives of those they meet and know in this world.

What is the culture? Culture is a word that means, “This is the way we do things.” Jesus came into the world to change culture - to revolutionize culture. His deliberate strategy was to change the hearts of men and then send them into the culture to revolutionize the culture. These three chapters of Scripture record the teaching of Jesus that was and is intended to revolutionize the world! That

strategy is clear if we understand what Jesus meant when He told these disciples: “You and you alone are the salt of the earth.”

Sometimes believers have a fortress mentality, hide away and have no relationships with unbelievers. We cannot have a salt influence on the people of this world if we are all in a “saltshaker”. It will only be as we have relationships with the people of this world that we will show them the attitudes of a disciple of Christ as God gives us the grace to live out those attitudes.

When Jesus prayed for His apostles, He asked the Father not to take them out of this world (John 17:15). At least one way our Lord spreads the salt around is through the hard reality that we must work to support our families. That gives us relationships with the lost people we are to impact with our Christ-like attitudes. He has also accomplished this throughout church history through persecution.

I heard an eloquent missionary statesman confront the “fortress mentality” of his missionaries in a foreign country when he said: “Missionaries are like manure. When they all stick together they stink, but if you spread them around, they do a little good.”

By the grace of God are you the salt of the earth? Does the miracle that Christ has given you these attitudes revolutionize the people you encounter? If you profess to be a disciple of Jesus and that miracle is not a reality in your life, there is an awesome warning here. According to Jesus, you are good for nothing! You are to be thrown out and stepped on. This is one of the hard sayings of Jesus.

These two metaphors of salt and light also imply that disciples of Jesus have been changed. Rubbing meat against meat will not preserve that meat from corruption. The salty disciple must be different from the people they influence. Another application of this metaphor is that the salty disciple makes others thirsty for what they are and have in Christ. To have that effect on people we must be changed and we must be different. Jesus will ask the question at the end of this chapter, “What do you do more than others?” (47) The beatitudes of Jesus profile that difference and provide an answer to that question of Jesus.

The Light of the World

The second metaphor is also making a statement about His disciple and about the world. Again the literal wording is, “You and you alone are the light of the world.” When Jesus wept over those multitudes, the thing that moved Him to compassion more than anything else was that they were like sheep having no shepherd. (9:36) They did not know their right hand from their left. They had no light. Just as the disciples were the only salt that could give or preserve life, they are the only source of light for the multitude.

At the end of His three years of public ministry, Jesus prayed His high priestly prayer, recorded in the seventeenth chapter of the Gospel of John. In that prayer Jesus mentioned the world nineteen times. The world was on His heart! Yet, He prayed, “I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given Me. The world

does not know, but I have given My disciples Your Word and they know” (John 17:9).

The only light this world has will come from His disciples. As the salt cannot influence the world while it is in a saltshaker, His disciples must go out where it is dark, and let the light that we are by the grace of God, shine into that darkness. If you are the only believer in your family, work place, neighborhood, village or university, remember that a candle in darkness has more value than one candle among fifty on an elaborate chandelier. If you are the only believer you know that means you are strategically placed in the darkness and that you and you alone are the light of the world for those who know you.

When Jesus commands, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven,” He knows they will realize that He must have lighted your candle because you could never be and do what they observe in your life. (Matthew 5:16)

A Candle on a Candlestick

This is an exceptionally profound metaphor. Jesus gives us the obvious interpretation and application when He observes that when a candle is lighted in a home, it is not placed under a basket but on a candlestick. We should therefore not place our witness under a basket where it has no impact on the darkness.

It is impossible for a candle to produce light without expending itself. The only way a candle could save or preserve itself would be for the candle to extinguish its light. Jesus is essentially teaching: “Before you became one of My disciples you were like an unlighted candle. But now that you have experienced the crisis involved in becoming a Christian, your candle has been lighted. I have lighted up your life and every time I light a candle, I have a chosen candlestick on which I plan to strategically place that candle.”

At the end of the three years He spent with them, Jesus said to His apostles, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit - fruit that will last” (John 15:16). The Greek word that is translated “appointed” means “to be strategically placed.” This is a Greek word found only three times in the Bible. Literally, Jesus was saying, “I have deliberately chosen you and strategically ordained a place for you to be fruitful.”

Have you ever seen a turtle on a fence post? Anytime you see a turtle on a fence post, there is one thing you know for sure about that turtle - he did not get there by himself; somebody had to put him there because turtles cannot climb a fence post! Every authentic follower of Christ should feel like a turtle on a fence post. We should all look around, realize where we have been strategically placed in this world, and, thinking of a turtle on a fence post, we should exclaim, “I could not be where I am if Christ had not placed me here.”

A City on a Hill

The fourth metaphor is: “A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.” (14) Jesus is now repeating for emphasis His teaching that when we have the eight Beatitudes in our lives, we cannot hide them like a candle under a basket. There is really no such thing as a secret disciple of Jesus Christ. Jesus officially makes that impossible when He commissions His disciples to baptize every person who professes to be His disciple (Matthew 28:18-20).

Jesus is teaching here that if we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, we will not be able to hide that blessed reality. Jesus was the ultimate realist. He highly valued performance over profession. These four metaphors emphasize the reality of what we are rather than what we profess. We are salt, light, a candle and a city on a hill. Mark tells us in his Gospel that people were so anxious to be with Jesus He had to search for secluded places to have some time alone with God because Who and what He was could not be hidden (Mark 7:24).

In the Beatitudes, Jesus told us to look in. In these metaphors, He is essentially saying, “Now look around. Look around at your world and consider the challenge involved when the kind of character you have forming in you by My grace will impact a culture that is corrupting, a culture that does not have life and a culture that is in darkness.”

Chapter Four

“Relational Righteousness”

(Matthew 5:17-48)

“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

“For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” (5:17-20)

We are now approaching the longest and most difficult section of The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:17-48). The passage begins with Jesus making a strong declaration about His approach to the Law of God and personal righteousness. Some people erroneously think Jesus was contradicting Moses in these verses. They therefore ask, “Why read the Old Testament if Jesus made the Old Testament obsolete?” Jesus did not make the Old Testament obsolete. He was not contradicting Moses in these verses. He was confronting the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees.

When Jesus referred to “the Law and the Prophets” He meant what we call “the Old Testament”. He was essentially telling His

disciples: “Everything I am teaching you is found in the Word of God, but what I am teaching is in direct conflict with what your religious leaders have been teaching you.” He was also essentially saying to His disciples: “When you go down there and live among those people, if you want to be part of My solution, you must understand how to apply the Word of God to the lives of people.”

He begins by declaring that He had not come to abolish the Law of God and that everything He was teaching was in complete alignment with and in fulfillment of the Law of God. In the next twenty-eight verses, He will elaborate on His opening statement about the differences between His approach to the Word of God and the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees. The essence of that difference is focused by the claim of Jesus that He has come to fulfill the Law of God and that every letter of the Hebrew words in the Law will be fulfilled through His teaching.

The Apostle Paul will label this difference as “the spirit of the law” versus “the letter of the law”. (2 Corinthians 3:6) Paul writes that the spirit of the Law gives life but the letter of the Law kills. The spirit of the law gives life because the spirit of the law is love. The spirit of the law reminds us that all the Law of God - or the Word of God - was born in the heart of God’s love for man. Jesus always had that in focus.

Jesus fulfilled the purpose of the Law, or Word of God, by always interpreting and applying the spirit of the Law. Another way of saying that is that He passed the Law of God through the “prism”

of the love of God before He applied the Law of God to the lives of the people of God. The scribes and Pharisees either did not know they were to do that or, they forgot that the Law of God was made for the well being of the people of God. They devastated God’s people by the way they ruthlessly applied the letter of the Law or Word of God to the lives of the people of God.

Jesus declared that the personal righteousness, or right living of His disciples must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. He warns that any disciple of His who breaks the least of the commandments of God and teaches others to do so will be least in the kingdom of heaven. He declares that unless His disciples do and teach the commandments of the Law, they will not be great in the kingdom He was presenting in His teaching.

As Jesus applies the beatitudes in the rest of this teaching (5:17-7:27), He will contrast the righteousness He teaches and requires of His disciples with the hypocritical “righteousness” of these religious leaders. The “righteousness” (we should always put that in quotes) of the scribes and Pharisees was external but the righteousness of the disciple of Jesus was to be internal. Jesus had hostile dialogue with these religious leaders because they emphasized the external forms of religion and ignored the critical internal issues of the heart (Mark 7:8, 15).

The righteousness of the religious establishment was merely horizontal. They emphasized the appearances of things – that they might appear before men to be religious. It was a show that was put

on for the benefit of men - that they might be seen when they give, or pray. But Jesus is essentially teaching His disciples, “Your righteousness must not be horizontal. It must be vertical. It must be before and as unto God.” That is why He instructs His disciples not to practice their righteousness before men (6:1).

The righteousness Jesus taught His disciples was Scriptural whereas the righteousness of these religious leaders was largely traditional. The righteousness of the Pharisee was often not really based on the Scripture and when it was scriptural it was not a proper interpretation of the Scripture.

Jesus summarizes the difference between the righteousness He taught and that of the religious establishment when He calls them “hypocrites”. This was the Greek word for the false face or mask that was worn by actors in the Greek plays, which were part of the Greek World Empire that preceded the Roman Empire. When Jesus chose that name as His favorite description of these leaders, He was declaring that their righteousness was hypocritical while the righteousness of His disciple was to be real.

When we understand what Jesus is saying in these verses about the Scriptures and righteousness, we will realize why He was continuously in conflict with the scribes and Pharisees. We will also have an introduction to this difficult and long passage we are now approaching.

In these twenty-eight verses, six times we will hear Jesus say something like this: “It has been said,” or “They have been teaching

you for a long time, but now hear what the Word of God really teaches.” Six times He will make reference to the teaching of their religious leaders and then Jesus will give His teaching.

There are times when He disagrees with the way the religious leaders interpret and apply the Law of God. He will then fulfill the Law of God by teaching the spirit of the Law. Sometimes Jesus is directly opposing a traditional teaching of their Talmud, which was not taught in the Word of God. Matthew and Mark both describe Jesus in a hostile confrontation with these leaders because they placed their tradition in authority over the Word of God (Matthew 15:3-6; Mark 7:9-13).

With that perspective in mind, consider six teachings of the scribes and Pharisees that are challenged by Jesus regarding:

Your Brother

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’ But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire.

“Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your

gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” (5:21-24)

Throughout the entire Bible there are two words that summarize the truth God is teaching His people. Those two words are: “God first!” In this passage we have an exception to that emphasis. When Jesus shows us how to apply the beatitudes to our brother, or other believers, He teaches: “First ... your brother, then God.”

Jesus is placing a strong emphasis on the critical importance of our relationship to our fellow believers. Essentially, He is teaching that we must apply the fifth and sixth beatitudes of the merciful disciple - who has nothing in his or her heart but God’s love - to those with whom we worship, live and serve Christ. We are not even permitted to come to God in private worship if there is anything that has alienated our relationship with the one Jesus calls our “brother”.

He taught elsewhere that if we are the brother who has something against another, we must reconcile with our brother (Mark 11:25). He also teaches this spiritual discipline in the context of the spiritual community of a church (Matthew 18:15-17).

I once heard the director of a large international missionary organization tell several hundred of his missionaries: “We cannot win the world if we lose each other!” He then showed them an unusual book. The title on the outside cover of the book was: The

Greatest Problem of Missionaries. When he opened the book, inside there were only two words: “Other missionaries!”

Perhaps that was the burden of Jesus when He gave this strong teaching about the critical importance of believers cultivating and maintaining loving relationships.

The religious leaders taught that as long as you did not murder, or do your brother bodily harm, your relationship with your brother was acceptable to God. Jesus goes to the source of hostile conflict between two people of God by addressing the anger that causes these conflicts. He teaches that anger and feelings of disgust toward our brothers or sisters must be addressed if we want to have the relationship with our fellow believer that is acceptable to God.

Your Adversary

“Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny.” (Matthew 5:25, 26)

In the last verses of this chapter Jesus will show us how to apply the beatitudes to our enemy. This “adversary” is what we might call our “competitor”. We live in a very competitive world. When we do business with some people, they always get the money and we always get the experience. This adversary is one of those

people who are determined to get our money and give us an experience.

Sometimes our relationship with these adversaries becomes hostile and they are determined to sue us, or even put us in prison. The beatitude Jesus would have us apply to our adversaries and enemies is obviously, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” The disciples with the seventh and eighth beatitudes do not get angry and get even when their adversaries demonstrate the harsh reality that they do not wish us well.

Although we cannot control what this adversary does, a disciple of Jesus accepts the responsibility of seeing to it that he will not be the cause of the conflict with adversarial people. Paul wrote that in so far as our responsibility goes, we are to live at peace with all men (Romans 12:18). Our responsibility in these relationships has a point at which it begins and a there is always that place where our responsibility ends. We cannot control - and are therefore not responsible - for what our adversary is going to do.

Women

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

“If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members

perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.” (27-30)

Since this teaching is addressed to men, we can assume this was a men’s retreat. Obviously, this teaching also applies to devout women who want to be salt and light for Jesus. The interpretation and application is that this teaching applies to our relationships with the opposite sex.

As He did with murder and anger, Jesus goes to the source of the sin of adultery. He did not teach that lust, or what He labeled as committing adultery in our hearts, is a sin equal to literal adultery. His point was that if we really want to be part of His solution and answer - and have a salt and light impact - we must learn how to control our sexual desires.

If we do not want to commit adultery we must win the battle by addressing the issues that lead to adultery - looking with lust and thinking adulterous thoughts. His brother James gives a detailed anatomy of a sin in his New Testament letter. He writes that a look is followed by strong desire, or lust. Lust leads to temptation, which is followed by sin, and sin always leads to that banquet of consequences the Bible labels as “death”. (James 1:13-15, Romans 6:23)

Jesus and His brother James teach that it is easier to conquer sexual sin before taking a second look, thinking impure thoughts and

nurturing lust. We should win the victory before our lust leads to the confrontation of temptation. Jesus taught that His disciples should pray every day that they might avoid temptation. (Matthew 6:13)

The teaching of Jesus about plucking out our right eye or cutting off our right hand should not be applied literally. The spirit of this teaching is that if what we are looking at is leading us to sin, we should stop looking. Only the Lord knows the sin that is caused in our world today because people look at pornography, or provocative movies that incite them to lust and sexual sin.

Likewise, He is teaching that if what we are doing with our hand is leading us to sin, we should stop doing it. In another place He includes the foot and the application is that if where our feet are taking us is leading to sin, we should not go there (Matthew 18:8).

Your Wife

“Furthermore it has been said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.” (Matthew 5:31, 32)

All the teaching of Jesus on this mountaintop should be interpreted and applied by remembering the context in which this teaching was given. The strategy of Jesus is to train disciples who will be sent out to have a salt and light impact on the people who are

overwhelmed with their problems at the bottom of the mountain. We must remember that the multitude represents a world of lost people.

Solomon wrote that children are like arrows and their parents are like a bow from which they are thrust out into life (Psalm 127:3-5). The values, purpose and direction in the lives of children depend upon the bow that has launched them into life. Today, all over the world, the devil is trying to cut the string on that bow. Divorce and separation is epidemic in many cultures. In this paragraph Jesus is teaching that if we want to be part of His solution and answer, we must apply His blessed attitudes to our relationship with our spouse.

This is an example of where the scribes and Pharisees were quoting Moses, but Jesus did not agree with their interpretation and application of what Moses was teaching. Moses did command that if a man divorced his wife, “Let him give her a certificate of divorce.” (Deuteronomy 24:1-4)

As Jesus pointed out to these same leaders on another occasion, Moses permitted that certificate of divorce as a concession because of the hardness of their hearts (Matthew 19:7, 8). Far back into the Old Testament period of Hebrew history, Jewish spiritual leaders interpreted Moses to mean that, if a man was displeased with his wife for almost any reason, he could divorce her and simply put her away. The husband was not required to tell his wife, or anyone else why he divorced his wife. He could imply that she was unfaithful to him.

Moses therefore decreed that, “If you divorce your wife, you must give her a certificate of divorce.” That certificate of divorce would state the reason for the divorce and require the husband to make some provisions for the care of the wife he was divorcing. Since a woman could barely survive in the Jewish culture without a husband, Moses was actually trying to protect women when he required that certificate of divorce.

Jesus is not teaching that divorce is acceptable. God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16) Jesus is teaching that if there is reason for divorce His disciple should be righteous even in this. (For more on this see my Booklets 6, 7 and 13 on Marriage and Family and 1 and 2 Corinthians)

Your Word

“Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.’ But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God’s throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’. For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.” (Matthew 5:33-37)

We now return to a teaching of the Jewish spiritual leaders that was not in the Law of God. In their tradition, they had an elaborate system regarding oaths that were binding and oaths that

were not binding (Matthew 23:16). They would say, “I swear by the Temple,” or, “I swear by the gold of the temple.” Or, “I swear by the altar,” or “I swear by the sacrifice on the altar.” They would swear by heaven or they would swear by the earth, or by Jerusalem.

Those in their inner circle knew when these oaths were and word not binding. Innocent people who did not understand these complex distinctions would be shocked to discover that what they understood to be a solemn agreement was not really a binding agreement at all.

This system was complicated to the point of being absurd and ridiculous. This was in direct conflict with the commandment that we are not to bear a false witness. No wonder that Jesus demolished all this nonsense with His bold declaration that anything more than your “yes” or “no” was coming from the devil! The spirit of this teaching is that His disciples must be known as men of the Word and men of their word.

Evil People

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.” (38-42)

Jesus is again in disagreement with the way the scribes and Pharisees interpreted and applied the Law of Moses. These religious leaders had been teaching “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” You will find this in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. However, Jesus is declaring, “I do not agree with the spirit of the Law in which they are teaching ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’”

As he did when he permitted that certificate of divorce, when Moses commanded “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” he was setting a limit for the hard hearts of a stubborn and difficult people. He was limiting their sinful desire for revenge. If someone knocked out their tooth, their attitude was, “I am going to break your neck!” If somebody gouged out their eye, their attitude was, “I am going to take off your head!”

That is not justice but a sinful desire for vengeance. Justice would be an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. This is often the spirit of the desire that drives lawsuits. Jesus therefore speaks of how we should apply His beatitudes when we are being taken to court and sued. When we hear in countries like America - of people suing for multiple millions of dollars, it is obvious that those people are going far beyond justice; they are seeking vengeance or selfish gain. How would it impact our lives, courts and the legal systems of our culture if we took this teaching of Jesus seriously?

Jesus was fulfilling and going beyond the spirit of the Law of Moses when He taught, “But I tell you not to resist an evil person.” He is elaborating on this statement and obviously applying the

beatitudes of the persecuted peacemakers when He instructs His disciples to turn the other cheek, give their cloak also when they are sued for their tunics, go the extra distance, generously give and do not refuse a loan when one is requested. What was Jesus teaching in this difficult passage?

When I asked a businessman what it was like working in the highly competitive world of business, he responded, “We are taking no prisoners and shooting our wounded!” There is a line in a poem that proclaims: “All nature is red in tooth and claw.”

Life can be like a dogfight and so competitive it seems like a rat race. However, it is only a “dogfight” and a “rat race” if we are “dogs” and “rats.” Jesus was teaching, that when His disciples live His eight blessed attitudes as they relate to people in this world, they show the people of this world that it does not have to be that way.

In those days, the conquering Romans could commandeer a Jewish citizen to carry their pack for a couple of kilometers. They had to obey when they were conscripted to do that, but they did not have to submit with a terrible attitude. Jesus teaches, “If they force you to go a kilometer, go two kilometers. In the first generations of the church, some of the earliest converts were Roman soldiers who became believers because devout disciples of Jesus lived out the beatitudes in their interaction with their conquerors.

Your Enemy

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father 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.

“For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.” (43-48)

I believe these six verses are the most difficult verses in the teachings of Jesus to interpret and apply. The church has never agreed on what they mean, or how they should be applied. They teach the highest ethic this world has ever heard.

For the sixth time in this chapter Jesus begins a teaching by referencing what the religious teachers had been teaching. This time Jesus teaches: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’” Half of this was Moses and the other half was an addition of their traditional teaching. Moses did command, “Love your neighbor” (Leviticus 19:18), but he did not command, “Hate your enemy.” In the Psalms we do find David, who is a man after the heart of God, telling us he hates the enemies of

God. But we are not commanded in God’s Word to hate our enemies.

As we read the last eleven verses of this chapter, it is very important for us to remember that this teaching at the “First Christian Retreat” was not given to those at the bottom of the mountain. Jesus gave this teaching to those who were saying by their presence there on the mountain that they were disciples of Jesus. The very fact that they are called “disciples” means that they had a high level of commitment to Jesus when they showed up at that retreat.

This is the essence of the total commitment Jesus asked from a disciple: “If you want to follow Me, but you are not willing to take up your cross and die for Me, you cannot be My disciple. If you are not willing to put Me first, ahead of all the people in your life - husband, wife, father, mother, children, parents - you cannot be My disciple. If you are not willing forsake every possession you have, you cannot be My disciple.” (Luke 14:25-35)

Those who attended this retreat had made those commitments to Jesus. They had told Jesus they were willing to take up their crosses and follow Jesus. They had probably seen pathetic victims of Roman crucifixion carrying their crosses to their places of execution. They knew the meaning of this awesome metaphor. When Jesus gave the teaching in these six verses, He was simply telling them the why, where, and how of that cross they had promised to carry as they followed Him.

This teaching of Jesus also challenges the way these spiritual leaders were interpreting and applying the Law of Moses. Do you remember the question that was asked by a lawyer, which drew from Jesus The Parable of the Good Samaritan? That question was, “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29) That was a very profound question because the traditional ethic, which was taught by the scribes and Pharisees, was that your neighbor is your fellow-Jew, but every non-Jewish person in the world was your enemy. And then, this application was given: Love your fellow-Jew, but hate all those other people.

Be sure to observe that the motivation for loving our enemies is: “That you may be sons of your Father in heaven.” This is the blessing Jesus promised those who live out His seventh and eighth beatitudes as persecuted peacemakers.

There is at least one other principle of commitment that must be in place if we are to take this teaching of Jesus seriously. If we read these verses and say, “If we did that, we would lose everything,” then this teaching is not going to make sense to us. We must realize that self-preservation is not the supreme ethic of a disciple of Jesus.

The Apostle Paul understood the commitment of discipleship when he wrote: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20)

What does it mean to be crucified with Christ? It means to be willing to carry our cross and follow Him. When Jesus faced His own cross, He said: “Except a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it is only a grain of wheat. It is when it dies and is buried that it bears fruit.” Then, He prayed: “Father, My soul is greatly troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Save me from this hour’? But for this cause I came into the world.”

And so He prays, “Father, glorify Yourself.” A voice from heaven essentially responds: “I have done that before and I will do it again.” (John 12:23-28) In the context of His crisis, Jesus commanded His disciples to join Him in their acceptance of the total commitment He modeled when He faced His cross (John 12:25, 26).

A godly pastor exhorted every disciple of Jesus to pray his paraphrase of this prayer of Jesus: “Father, glorify Yourself and send me the bill. Anything Father. Simply glorify Yourself!” It is only when we join our Lord in the prayer He prayed in the shadow of His cross that we will understand, accept and apply the highest ethical standard this world has ever heard.

During the Holy Wars Francis of Assisi was nursing a Turk who had been wounded. A crusader passing by on horseback said, “If that Turk gets well Francis, he will kill you!” Francis responded, “Well then, he will have known divine love before he does!”

Observe how Jesus ends this teaching: “Therefore you shall be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.” (48) The word “perfect” does not mean sinless perfection. It means, “Be mature,

complete, all that God created you to be.” If the word “perfect” bothers you, omit the word “perfect” at the beginning and the end of the verse. As a summary of all His teaching about the spirit of the law, Jesus is teaching that we are to be, even as our heavenly Father, is.” Jesus is teaching that as children of God we are to be like our Father God. What is He like?

The Apostle Paul instructs husbands to love their wives even as Christ loved the church when He gave Himself for it.” (Ephesians 5:25) When Paul instructs these husbands to love, even as Christ loved and loves, and to give even as He gave and gives, he is really teaching the same thing Jesus is teaching here: we are to be - even as Christ is. Is that possible?

What is the most dynamic teaching in the New Testament? To me, it is this: “Christ in You, the hope of glory.” Paul literally wrote: “I’ve been raised up by God to share a secret with the church. And that secret is simply this, that Christ in your hearts is your only hope” (Colossians 1:27).

This ethical teaching of Jesus is absolutely impossible - it is even ludicrous - unless this great miracle is in place: “Christ in you; you in Christ,” And, “together with Him.” But the most dynamic teaching of the New Testament is in place! We can therefore take this teaching seriously and dare to answer those questions: “What did Jesus say? What did He mean?” And “What does that mean to me?”

The most profound verse in this awesome passage of Scripture fits into the strategy and mission objective of Jesus as He

holds this retreat. Jesus asked this question: “What do you do more than others?”

As I observed earlier, salt must be different from the meat into which it is rubbed if it is going to preserve that meat from corruption. One translation reads: “If you only love those who love you, what grace do you practice?” (Matthew 5:46) The meaning is that it takes no grace to love those who love us but it does take supernatural grace to love those who are our enemies.

This difficult passage - in fact this entire chapter - challenges us with this question: “Is there anything in our lives that can only be explained by the spiritual secret that our risen, Lord Jesus Christ lives in our hearts?”

Chapter Five

“Spiritual Disciplines and Vertical Values”

(Matthew 6:1-34)

Jesus has now challenged His disciples to look in and consider the blessed attitudes that must be in their hearts (5:3-12). Then He challenged them look around and apply those beatitudes in their relationships (5:13-48). By the time He finished teaching them how these attitudes were to be applied in their relationships -

especially to their adversaries, evil people, and enemies - they were more than ready for what He taught them next.

The sixth chapter records Jesus directing His disciples to look in another direction. He now challenges His disciples to find the dynamic they are now convinced they need by looking up. Since a disciple - by definition - has made the commitment to be a disciplined person, He directs them to a daily regimen of looking up by teaching them the critical priority of living their lives by spiritual, or vertical disciplines and values.

The Spiritual Discipline of Giving

“Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

“So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth. They have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” (6:1-4)

I have observed that the “righteousness” of the scribes and Pharisees was horizontal while the righteousness Jesus taught and demanded of His disciples was vertical. The first four verses of this sixth chapter eloquently demonstrate that distinction. Although we

find this hard to imagine today, the Pharisees actually carried a small trumpet in their robes and before they dropped a coin in the cup of a beggar, they blew that trumpet. They wanted men to see their giving and honor them for being pious and generous.

Jesus wrote His favorite word for them across this practice: “Hypocrites!” Like the Greek actors these Pharisees were wearing a mask and merely playing a role when they gave in this way. They were obviously practicing their righteousness before men - to be seen and honored by men - which motivated Jesus to give these instructions that were to discipline the giving of His disciples. His instruction was that His disciples are to give anonymously and in secret - not even letting their left hand know what their right hand is giving.

When these hypocrites received the praise of men, they had the only reward they would receive for their giving. Disciples of Jesus are to give secretly to the God Who sees what is given in secret. He will reward them openly for their private and devout giving - which is really the essence of faith and of worship. The faith chapter of the Bible informs us that he who would come to God and please God must believe that He is, and that He rewards those who diligently seek Him because they believe that He is (Hebrews 11:6).

Before we are too harsh in our judgment of these Pharisees, we must ask ourselves if we do not figuratively blow a trumpet when we give in such a way that people know what we have given. As a pastor, I have found that large gifts are frequently given personally in

a way that the pastor and sometimes the entire church knows the gift was given. I have been told that it is a wonderful experience to give a large gift anonymously - and then be discovered!

We must make the observation that the first spiritual discipline Jesus requires of those who want to be one of His solutions and answers - the salt of the earth and the light of the world - is the discipline of stewardship. Jesus teaches later that God will withhold the true riches or spiritual blessings - from a disciple who is not a faithful steward (Luke 16:10, 11). This makes giving one of the most important spiritual disciplines in the life of a disciple.

The Spiritual Discipline of Prayer

Jesus demands this same mindset when He teaches His disciples how to pray: “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your closet, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

“And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

“This, then, is how you should 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 this day 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. For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.’

“For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” (6:5-15).

Praying is not preaching. When we pray in a public worship service, or with others, we must remember these instructions of Jesus and be sure we are talking to God. Jesus shows us how to be sure we are talking to God when we pray when He clearly values closet prayer over corporate prayer. He instructs us to go into a closet (or any place we can be alone), and shut the door because there is nobody there to impress but God.

Once He has established the mindset with which a disciple of His should approach prayer, Jesus teaches them how to pray. He gives us a model prayer that should be called “The Disciples’ Prayer.” It is often called “The Lord’s Prayer,” but it should not be called that because the Lord never prayed this prayer. His instruction was, “This, then, is how you should pray.”

Although this is a prayer, and the plural pronouns suggest it is to be prayed with others, it is primarily a model prayer, or a model

for prayer that is clearly intended to teach us how to pray. Luke presents Jesus giving this prayer instruction in response to the request of the apostles: “Lord, teach us to pray.” (Luke 11:1-4)

The essence of this prayer/model Jesus taught is three God-first petitions and then four personal petitions. A providential petition is a prayer request that has what matters most to God at the center of the request. The message of the Bible frequently sifts down to two words. Those two words are simply, “God first.” These first three petitions challenge the disciple to pray about that which concerns God before we bring our personal problems to God. The three petitions that put God first are: “Hallowed be Your name, Your kingdom come,” and “Your will be done.”

A personal petition is a prayer request that has what His disciple needs at the center of the petition. The four personal petitions are: “Give us this day our daily bread, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, lead us not into temptation,” and “Deliver us from the evil one.”

Jesus is instructing His disciples to enter directly into the presence of God and address God as “Our Father!” That was a radical concept to the disciples who heard Jesus give this teaching. They were all Jews who had been taught all their lives to perceive and approach God as an awesome God Who could only be approached through a priest. Jesus is presenting a personal God Who is interested in every detail of the daily needs of His disciple. David also had profiled a personal God when he declared: “The Lord is my

Shepherd (Psalm 23).

After addressing God as Father, there are three petitions which teach us to pray “God first” prayers: Your name, Your kingdom and Your will. The name of God is the essence of Who and what God is. The disciple is actually praying, “God, I want to live in such a way that others will know and reverence the essence of Who and what You are.”

Then they are to pray, “Your kingdom come”. This simply means that God is a King and when they make Him their King they are part of His kingdom. They are praying, “Father, I am not building a kingdom of my own. I want Your kingdom rule in my heart and I want to live my life as your loyal subject.

The third providential petition is a paraphrase of the second one: “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” When He is about to be arrested and crucified, Jesus sweats blood as He prays, “Oh My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; Nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.” (Matthew 26:39) We should call that prayer “The Lord’s Prayer” because that is a prayer Jesus did pray. Jesus not only taught His disciples to pray this third petition. He modeled this petition when He was facing His greatest crisis.

Paul informs us that we have the Treasure of the risen Christ living in our earthen vessels (our bodies), that it might be obvious to everybody that the power source of our lives is coming from God and not from us. One scholar I respect believes that this third

providential petition should read “in earth” rather than “on earth”. He believes Jesus was teaching that we should ask our heavenly Father to do His will in our earthen vessels, even as His will is done in heaven. Obviously, if the will of the Father is done in us, then the will of the Father will be done on earth through us.

Those three God-first petitions should send the message to every disciple of Jesus that they are not to come into their prayer closets, or corporate worship prayers, with a “shopping list” of their wants and demands and send God on errands for them. When they pray, they should come into the presence of God with a blank sheet of paper and ask God to send them on errands for Him. In their closet and corporate prayers, they should be like soldiers reporting for duty to their Commander and King.

When Jesus mandated that these three God-first petitions must precede personal petitions when we pray, He was teaching that prayer is not a matter of persuading God to do our will. The very essence of prayer is an alignment with and submission of our wills to the will of God. Prayer is not a matter of us making God our partner and taking God into our plans. As modeled by Jesus, the very essence of prayer is God making us His partners and taking us into His plans.

The Personal Petitions

“Give Us this Day Our Daily Bread ...”

We must continue to look through the priority grid of God-

first as we get to the “give me” part of this prayer Jesus taught us. The three “God-first” petitions should focus our motivation as we come before our heavenly Father with our personal petitions. Why do we want our heavenly Father God to give us our daily bread, one day at a time? We should ask our perfect heavenly Father to provide our daily bread because we earnestly desire to see the essence of Who and what God is, honored and revered on earth in and through us.

This prayer of Jesus teaches that we are to pray “this day” and “daily” when we present our creature needs to our Creator and heavenly Father. Observe how Jesus concludes the sixth chapter of Matthew with this same emphasis: “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” (34) In other words, live one day at a time.

In this first personal petition the Lord is using the symbol of bread to represent all our needs. Bread is a metaphor that should not be limited to our need for food but applied to all the needs we have as creatures of God. We must have bread to sustain our bodies every day, and we must have our souls and spirits nourished with heavenly manna every day, one day at a time.

“Forgive Us Our Debts as We Forgive Our Debtors”

The next three personal petitions obviously apply to our spiritual needs. The second personal petition is for forgiveness and is followed by petitions for guidance and deliverance. The principle of

one day at a time we learn in the petition for daily bread should also definitely be applied to these three petitions for our spiritual needs. Forgiveness, guidance and deliverance are also needs we have everyday. The spirit of these four personal petitions is: “Give us this day our daily bread, including our need for forgiveness, guidance and deliverance.”

“Lead Us Not into Temptation ...”

According to James, God is not tempted with evil and He never tempts any man (James 1:13). In the light of that teaching, why would our Lord teach us to pray to our heavenly Father God, Who never tempts any man, “Lead us not into temptation?”

I am persuaded that the spirit of this petition is based on the collective teaching of Scripture that we are not pillars of strength when it comes to temptation. Jesus accurately evaluated our human condition when He said, “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (Matthew 26:41).

When Jesus was facing the greatest crisis of His life, He asked the apostles to pray with Him. When they fell asleep, He woke them and said, “You should be praying that you enter not into temptation.” (Luke 22:46) His meaning seemed to be something like, “If you only knew the power of the evil one and the weakness of your flesh, you would be awake and praying that you would not have to face the confrontation of temptation.”

When Jesus prescribed this third personal petition, “Lead us not into temptation,” He was being consistent with His evaluation of

our human condition, our flesh - our “human nature unaided by God”. I believe it would be a legitimate paraphrase of this third personal petition to pray it this way, “Lead us, and we will not find ourselves facing the confrontations of the temptation to commit sin.”

“... But Deliver Us from the Evil One.”

In an old hymn, Martin Luther warned us that we have an ancient spiritual enemy who does not wish us well. He is fiercely opposed to everything Christ wants to do in and through us. Satan’s craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate, on earth is not his equal. Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing, were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God’s own choosing. You ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He!

This petition to be delivered from our ancient enemy should also be prayed every day.

The God-first Benediction

“For Yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever, Amen.”

Jesus taught us to begin and end our prayers with a God-first mindset: “Your kingdom come,” and “Yours is the kingdom.” When Jesus prescribed this benediction, He was teaching us to conclude our prayers with a solemn pledge to God that the results and glory of His answering the petitions outlined in this model/prayer will always belong to Him.

In Summary

The prayer Jesus taught challenges us to be sure to address our prayers to God the Father. We are not instructed to pray to Jesus or to the Holy Spirit. We are instructed to address God intimately as our perfect, loving heavenly Father. We are then to begin our prayers with three providential, or God-first petitions, which are: Your name, Your kingdom, and Your will. Those three providential petitions are to be followed by four personal petitions: Give us, forgive us, lead us, and deliver us. Finally, we are instructed to conclude our prayer(s) by confessing, “Because the power to answer my prayer(s) will always come from You, the result will always belong to You and the glory will always go to You. So be it!”

The Discipline of Fasting

Like giving and praying, Jesus taught that the spiritual discipline of fasting must also be vertical (16–18). Observe that Jesus does not say, “if you fast” but “when you fast”. He told His disciples that when they fasted, they should not have a hungry look as if they were saying, “I am at the end of a four-day fast and I am about to faint!” Jesus told them to have a radiant facial expression when they were fasting.

Just as giving provides an opportunity for us to measure our “God first” commitment to God, fasting gives us an opportunity to measure the degree to which we value the spiritual more than the

physical and demonstrates the sincerity of our prayers. According to Jesus, some miracles are possible only by prayer and fasting (Matthew 17:21).

The Vertical Values of a Disciple

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

“The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!”

“No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.” (Matthew 6:24)

Jesus is now about to profile the values of a disciple who is living the blessed attitudes. According to the dictionary, a value is: “That which is desirable or worthy of esteem for its own sake.” One of the reasons those people at the bottom of the mountain have so many problems is that they do not have the right values. To have a salt and light influence when they return to that multitude, His disciples must have the values He is now going to teach them.

After an opening statement in which Jesus taught that they should not spend themselves for treasures that depreciate, or can be taken from them, Jesus makes three important observations about values. His first observation is a profound standard by which His disciples can measure their values: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” In other words, “Show Me your treasures and you will show Me your heart and your values.”

He follows this by presenting the challenge that one of the most important questions His disciples ever ask or answer is: “How do we see things?” When Jesus says, “If your eyes are good,” (6:22) He means their mindset. Good values are the difference between a body filled with light (happiness, purity, blessings), and a body filled with darkness, or unhappiness. His awesome warning is that the wrong values can lead to great unhappiness. As I observed, when world leaders like those who have killed millions, in China, Russia and Germany they have the wrong mindset, and great darkness results for the entire world.

His third awesome statement about values is one of His hard calls to commitment. They cannot have spiritual “double vision” and be His disciple. They cannot serve two masters - God and money.

Personal Application

We must respond to this challenge of Jesus. Are we are spending ourselves for temporal or eternal treasures? According to Jesus, that question will be answered for us if we will consider our

activities, or what we do all day; our attitudes, or what we think about all day; our anxieties, or what we worry about all day; our ambitions, or what we want all day, and our allegiances - who and what we serve all day. Jesus is making the dogmatic declaration that a disciple of His cannot serve Him as Lord and anything or anyone else. Since He is making this declaration in the context of this teaching about values, His standard is that a disciple cannot serve God and money.

Salt and Light Values

“Therefore I say to you, do not worry 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? Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?”

“So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, Oh you of little faith?” (Matthew 6:25-30)

Although there is a strong emphasis in these verses on how to address anxiety, Jesus is primarily teaching values. Observe at least

twenty questions He asks or implies as these values are presented. Questions like: What is your body? What is your worth or value? Why worry about things you cannot control? Do you believe the God Who feeds the birds and clothes the lilies can feed and clothe you?

“So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

“Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” (31-34)

Another word for values is priorities. Based on our values, every disciple of Jesus should have a “priority target” with a black circle surrounded by twelve concentric circles. Jesus concludes His values teaching by declaring that the center of His disciple’s priority targets should be the rule of God over their hearts. All the other circles are to be prioritized by the King of kings and Lord of lords as He shows them what is right. They have the promise of Jesus that, all those things they are tempted to worry about all day long will be provided by their heavenly Father.

I challenge you to confess these values of Jesus Christ. My wife and I decided to claim this promise of Jesus when we were married and started a church. Jesus has kept His promise to us since 1956. God has never failed to meet our needs and He will prove this

promise of Jesus to be true in your life if you will make Him and what He wants you to do the first priority of your life.

Chapter Six

“The Invitation”

(Matthew 7:1-27)

In this final chapter of the Sermon on the Mount, we read that Jesus brought His greatest sermon to a verdict when He invited those who had heard His sermon to decide if they were going to be the salt of the earth or good for nothing. Jesus was the most practical Preacher/Teacher this world has ever heard. He concluded this “First Christian Retreat” by essentially saying to those who heard this discourse, “What we really believe, we do. All the rest is only religious talk - and nobody needs religious talk!”

Jesus has taught His disciples to look in and realize that His eight beatitudes will make them the salt and light the people in that multitude desperately need. He has also instructed them to look around and apply these blessed attitudes in their relationships. That was so challenging they were more than ready to hear His exhortation to look up and receive from God the dynamic - the spiritual disciplines and values - they desperately need if they are to look in and around as they should.

The challenge of Jesus now is, “What are you going to do about what you know?” He frequently emphasized practical application when He had given a great teaching. Later, when He washes the feet of the apostles and teaches them humility, He declares, “If you know these things, you will be blessed when you do them!” He also asks the question, “How can you call Me ‘Lord, Lord’ and do not the things I say?” (John 13:17; Luke 6:46)

He will now challenge those who have heard His sermon with three exhortations: “Before you leave this mountain, make a total, unconditional commitment to look in, around and up.”

“Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the log in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

“Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces.” (7:1-6)

Jesus had a great sense of humor. He sometimes used humor to overstate and vividly illustrate the truth He was teaching. For example, He said these religious leaders strain out a gnat and

swallow a camel.” (Matthew 23:24) To make His point - that His disciples should not be hypercritical - Jesus asks some questions: “Why are you trying to find the speck of sawdust in other people’s eyes when you have a log jammed in your own eye? How can you help someone else remove the speck from their eye when you have a log in jammed in your own eye?”

A man went to see his pastor. He had lettuce on his head, plus two fried eggs and pieces of bacon on each ear. When the shocked pastor asked him, “How may I help you?” The man replied, “Pastor, I want to talk to you about my brother!” Some people are obsessed with the problems of other people. Sometimes they are hypercritical and continuously blame everything on other people, when it is obvious to everyone that they are the problem.

Jesus eloquently describes such people with this humorous and discerning metaphor. He asks two profound questions: “Why are you doing this?” And, “How can you possibly be successful?” The thrust of this teaching is: make the commitment to look in and get the log out of your eye so that you can help people get those specs out of their eyes.

The next words from Jesus, however, do not show any humor. Jesus applied His humorous metaphor this way: “You hypocrite! Get that log out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to help your brother get the speck out of his eye.” Because this teaching begins with the statement that we are not to judge others, many people think that is the only truth Jesus was teaching here.

Actually, He was teaching that when it comes to relational problems, a disciple must join the “Me First Club”. A disciple of Jesus must let God deal with their personal problems before they can help others with theirs. Therefore, they are not to judge others severely. His instruction is, “Judge yourself first, then you can help others with their problems. Make the commitment to look in!

He added to this teaching that human relationships are a two-way street. Whatever measure you use on others they will use in their dealings with you. This was a marketplace metaphor. If you suspected a fellow merchant did not have an accurate bushel measurement, when you sold him your produce, you could tell him to use the measuring tools he used when you purchased from him. This was closure on His teaching about relating to your fellow disciple.

His teaching about pearls and pigs summarizes His challenging teaching about relating to adversaries, evil people and enemies. We are to reach these people, however, it is possible to waste ourselves, and our pearls when there is no interest in what we are presenting. We are not to be without discernment or indiscriminate, but wise stewards of our lives and ministries.

His second exhortation is a call to make the commitment to look up: “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

“Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (Matthew 7:7-11)

The entire sixth chapter recorded the exhortation of Jesus to look up and receive the spiritual disciplines and values that come from God. He is now calling for a total, unconditional commitment to learn and apply those disciplines and values He taught when He challenged them to look up.

In the Greek language, the present tense represents continuous action in time. These verses can therefore be paraphrased “Ask and keep on asking ... because the one who asks and keeps on asking receives etc. etc.” The point is that Jesus is challenging His disciples to look up continuously and with perseverance. Seeking is continuous and intense asking, and knocking is continuous and intense seeking. Jesus is calling His disciples to be God-passionate people!

This exhortation ends with the exciting promise that everyone who asks, seeks and knocks with perseverance will receive, find and eventually experience an opened door into the presence of God. That amazing promise is followed by the beautiful assurance that if we as flawed human beings give good gifts to our children, our loving, perfect heavenly Father will certainly give good gifts to those who ask Him.

I am totally amazed that very few teach and preach this invitation of Jesus today. I am grieved that even fewer disciples of Jesus respond to His invitation to become God-passionate disciples.

The third exhortation of Jesus before these disciples return to the relationships that await them at the bottom of the mountain is the call to make a total, unconditional commitment to look around: “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 7:12)

Jesus actually concludes His sermon with this verse, which is known as “The Golden Rule.” It is the greatest teaching this world has ever heard regarding human relationships. Jesus claims that this one short sentence fulfills the Law and the Prophets (the Old Testament), or the Scriptures that existed at that time.

One scholar has written: “As usual, with Jesus the main things are the plain things and the plain things are the main things.” What He is teaching here was simply this: “Pick out somebody in that crowd at the bottom of the mountain. Put yourself in the place of that person. If you were that person, what would you want a disciple of Jesus to do for you? When you know the answer to that question, then do it - whatever it is, simply do it! That is the whole teaching of the whole Bible on the subject of interpersonal relationships.”

Apply this teaching to your marriage partner, your children, your parents, or your brothers and sisters in Christ. Apply this Golden Rule to people of another race. It then becomes the Golden

Rule of race relations, marriage and family and spiritual community. Be sure to apply it to your adversaries and enemies.

Perhaps the primary application Jesus had on His heart was to apply this teaching to people who know nothing of Christ and salvation. It then becomes the Golden Rule of missions and evangelism.

The Great Invitation

Having issued His three calls for commitment, which ended with the Golden Rule, Jesus now gives a hard-saying-of-Jesus invitation. He was by no means inviting people to come and get something for nothing. This was not an invitation for salvation but His challenging call to become committed solutions and answers of Jesus and reach the world for Him.

The precedent for giving invitations that bring those who have heard preaching or teaching to a point of decision and commitment begins with Moses and the prophets (Deuteronomy 30:19, 20). Giving an invitation was an important distinctive in the ministry of Jesus Christ. When this retreat was organized the challenge was, “Are you part of the problem or will you be part of the solution? Are you in the multitude at the bottom of the mountain, or are you on the mountaintop with Jesus?”

But at the conclusion of the teaching, those who profess to be disciples of Jesus and who therefore are professing to be one of His solutions and answers, hear an awesome invitation. Remember, all

the people who heard this invitation professed to be believers. This is an invitation given to the disciples at the top of the mountain. The thrust of this invitation is, what kind of disciple are you?

Here is the invitation: “Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.” (13, 14)

There are two possibilities. Three times in this invitation Jesus will say there are two kinds of professing disciples. In this part of the invitation He says there are the many and the few. The many think there is an easy way to be a solution, to be an answer, to be salt and light. But they never do become solutions and answers. They are not really salty salt and bright lights; they merely profess to be. Jesus is essentially saying, “If you watch what happens to the many who follow the lines of least resistance and think that there is an easy way to be part of My answer and solution, you will decide you do not want to be one of the many.

“But then, there are the few. They know there is no easy way. The many believe that it starts with a wide gate which is followed by a broad, level road, but that funnels down to destruction. The few know that the gate is small and the road that follows that gate is narrow, difficult and disciplined. But that road leads to life. Only a few are finding it. The challenge is: Are you one of the many or one of the few?”

Jesus then presents two more possibilities: “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them.” (15-20)

The hard-hitting invitation continues: “Are you a false or a true disciple?” Jesus taught the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares in which He clearly predicted that His kingdom (church) will be a mix of the false and true (Matthew 13:24-30). He even taught that we will not be able to tell the difference. We should not be surprised to hear His invitation introduce these two possibilities of the false and true disciple.

He returns to the metaphor of the natural law in the spiritual world when He declares that we can tell the difference in our own lives or in the lives of others: “Every good tree bears good fruit. Bad trees bear bad fruit. A bad tree cannot bear good fruit.” In the same way, “A good tree cannot bear bad fruit.” The challenge is, are you a good tree or a bad tree? Are you a false or true disciple?

Now listen to this: “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your

name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’” (Matthew 7:21-23)

These are some of the most awesome words in the New Testament. Disciples will use three words to give their evaluation of the life and ministry they had as they followed Jesus: “Many wonderful works!” Jesus will then use three words to give His judgment of their life and ministry: “Worker of iniquity!”

The third set of possibilities in this hard-saying invitation of Jesus is, “Are you one of those disciples who merely say or one of those who actually do the will of the Father?”

This leads Jesus into the dramatic conclusion of His greatest discourse: “Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock; and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. Now everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand; and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall.” (24-27)

These closing words of Jesus continue the “those who say and those who do” theme of His invitation. The final challenge is that if a disciple has heard this teaching but they never apply what they have heard, they have no foundation for their life or for their profession of faith. If they do apply what they have heard, their life,

and their faith is built on a solid foundation.

If I gave you canvas, paints and brushes and you were a talented artist, what would you paint if I told you to paint “life”? Young people might paint something idealistic like a young person having a wonderful time. Their parents might paint something very pessimistic that would reflect the hard lives they have lived.

Jesus was not idealistic or pessimistic. He was realistic. He taught that life is storms. Nobody is immune to the storms of life. These storms beat down on both these houses. But the life that is built on obedience to His teaching survives the storms and the life that merely hears His teaching but does not obey them does not survive. That life collapses and the fall of it is very great! The sermon ends with the challenge, “What kind of disciple are you?”

The last words we read are the response of people who did not attend but were far enough up the slopes that gradually rise toward the top of the mountain to observe the teaching style of Jesus: “When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.” (28, 29)

Conclusion

Jesus invites you, like he invited His disciples, to be part of His solution to the multitudes that wander in hopeless darkness. Read these three chapters again and again and ask God to help you to not only understand but to obey and live by His teachings. Then

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.” (Matthew 7:7)

If you have decided to become a real follower and disciple of Jesus Christ please write to us and let us know so that we can send you other booklets that can help you grow in faith. My prayer is that God has used this booklet to help and encourage you to be a bright light where God has strategically placed you.