

Lessons from The Sermon on the Mount

Taken from Matthew 5-7.

John Hendershot

Text copyright © 2013 John C. Hendershot

All Rights Reserved

Cover:

Dedication

To the memory of John B. and Lillian V. Hendershot – who taught us to “pass
it on.”

Table of Contents

Blessings – I - Matthew 5:1-5

Blessings – II - Matthew 5:6-8

Blessings – III - Matthew 5:9-12

Salt and Light - Matthew 5:13-20

Anger Management - Matthew 5:21-26

You Have Heard It Said - Matthew 5:27-48

Stealth Christianity - Matthew 6:1-18

Consider the Lilies - Matthew 6:19-34

Art of Judgment - Matthew 7:1-6

The Quest - Matthew 7:7-12

The Straits - Matthew 7:13-20

Lord, Lord - Matthew 7:21-29

Blessings – I - Matthew 5:1-5

Matthew 5:1-5 NASB When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. (2) He opened His mouth and began to teach them, saying, (3) "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (4) "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. (5) "Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.

Preliminary

Actions of Jesus

The reader will please note that we have selected the New American Standard translation of the Bible. This translation brings out details which are often glossed over in other translations. For example:

- ✚ You will note that Jesus sees the crowds, and then reacts by going up onto a mountain. He is carefully planning to deliver teaching to them in a natural amphitheater. The implication of careful planning and a formal sermon (as we shall see) can sometimes be missed. These are not offhand remarks.
- ✚ He sits down. In this time, this action that a teacher would take to command the respect of his students (who would remain standing, quietly). Again we see the formality of the occasion.
- ✚ This translation records the phrase that he "opened his mouth and began to teach". It is an elegant flourish, suitable to the occasion, and usually missed in other translations.

A Psalm of Ascents

This section of the Sermon on the Mount has often been compared to some of the Psalms in the Old Testament, in particular the Psalms of Ascent. The phrase is somewhat ambiguous. It may mean simply a Psalm to be sung while going up the steps of the Temple. It's also possible that the Psalm was sung by pilgrims going up to Jerusalem. (Jerusalem is "up" compared to all the geography surrounding.) It's also possibly just a simple musical notation meaning that the melody rose. But the Psalms have always been taken to be a picture of the wayfarer — the common theme in Christian thought. As the old Negro spiritual once put it, "this world is not my home, I'm just a passing through." As such, we can gain insight into the way in which we should live. If this world is our home, then it makes sense to grub for money, fight for sex and live for pride. If it's not, then our minds should be on things above. The similar style is the clue to the parallel, but we should not neglect the thought behind.

Indeed, Hebrew poetry is clearly what is intended here. Hebrew poetry rhymes in thought (think of the 23rd Psalm.) We see the same thing here. This was done for at least one good reason: it helps you memorize the Scripture. The human brain likes to latch onto a structure which enables the memory.

Blessed

For the next three weeks we will be studying what are referred to as the Beatitudes. The reference is to the first word in each verse, "blessed." Note that this is in the indicative tense, not the imperative. There is no sense that we are commanded to bless someone; rather, this is a description of "how things are." It's more than that; the original Greek carries with it the idea that someone is "supremely blessed." What Christ is telling us here is the status and life of the wayfaring Pilgrim who enters the kingdom of God. It is quite obvious that from the world's point of view these things cannot

possibly be true. How can the poor in spirit be blessed, when they are poor in spirit? Yet it is the assertion of God that if you follow his way you will be both poor in spirit and blessed. Let's take a look.

Poor in Spirit

"I'm just a poor wayfaring stranger, traveling through this world of woe." Much of the happiness of mankind depends upon the expectations of the individual. If I expect to be fabulously rich, surrounded by beautiful blondes and sycophants who feed my ego — I'm going to be very disappointed. Of the world's wealth I have very little; I am married to one beautiful blonde who is rather insistent that she will tolerate no competition; and where the proud have sycophants I have critics. So by the world's standards I should be very unhappy. But that presumes that my expectations are those of the world; they are not. The Christian should expect a life of service, trouble and pain. We are wayfarers.

Let's take a geographic example. Suppose you're going to cross western Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. Just to make your trip interesting, let's do it on horseback. What should you expect? You should expect long, hot days; great distances between waterholes and a remarkable sameness to the scenery. If your expectation was that you are about to ramble down the Shenandoah Valley, you will be very disappointed. If you expected to get to Los Angeles, you'd have it about right. The Christian's life is much the same. If your expectations are that things in this life are going to go very well — that God is obligated to grant you prosperity and health — you are going to be disappointed. That's because of your selection of objectives. God is trying to get you to heaven; you're trying to be comfortable on Earth. The question is one of objective.

What Is Poverty

The word used for poor in this phrase actually carries with it the connotation of cringing. It's used in the original to portray the attitude of a beggar approaching a potential donor. It is the attitude of a Christian who knows that he must appeal to his heavenly Father for all those things which his Father already knows he needs. We are poor in spirit by choice, not by accident. We can't help it; we are faced with God the Almighty — so our proper attitude is not one of pride. Rather, it is the attitude of one who has devoted his life to service for God. If you've ever wondered just how you can be poor in spirit, look at it this way. Suppose I'm not poor in spirit; how would you recognize that? Wouldn't it be the case that there would be certain things that were "beneath my dignity?" I would be just too important a Christian to stoop to some particular task. But our Lord was quite clear; if you wish to be the leader of all, you must be the servant of all. So it is in Christian service that we exhibit our poverty of spirit.

You can see what this does for the inner man: it opens the door for the Holy Spirit. If we retain our pride, it is difficult for the Spirit to enter and be full in our lives. Think of it this way: suppose the Holy Spirit knocks on the door of your life. Do you open the door as if you are about to answer some door-to-door salesman's plea? Or do you open the door as a host, graciously welcoming a cherished guest?

Kingdom of Heaven

We cannot leave this verse without discussing just what is meant by the kingdom of heaven. The reward of being poor in spirit is the kingdom of heaven, and it is therefore fitting that we know just what the kingdom of heaven might happen to be.

- ✚ One example is the pearl of great price.¹ Whatever else the kingdom is, it must be worth so much that you would give up everything else you have to get it. But as Christ says, it little profits a man to sell his soul for the world.
- ✚ Another example is that of the wheat and the weeds.² We should not expect the church to be composed perfectly of perfect people; they're going to be some real stinkers in the church. It is God's choice to allow such so that the disruption of throwing them out does not harm the church. But we ought at least to know they are there.
- ✚ A third example is that of the landowner paying the wages to the day laborers.³ It will sometimes appear to us that God has inordinately blessed the least of sinners, and we wonder why we are treated the way we are. That is how God works; he chooses to reward as he chooses to reward. Salvation is available to those who work all their lives for him, as well as those who are deathbed conversions.
- ✚ Finally, remember that parable of the 10 virgins.⁴ The kingdom requires the vigilance of its members, always being ready for the return of their Lord. Sadly, we find here from our Lord that not all of those of us who have attended church regularly are in fact going to inherit the kingdom of God.

We are citizens of the kingdom of heaven; but heaven is not to be found in this world. We are wayfarers, headed home. As long as we are on the journey, we shall be poor in spirit. But at the end of the journey we find that which we have sought: the kingdom of heaven.

Mourning

Permit me to introduce to you the concept of godly sorrow:

2 Corinthians 7:10 NASB (10) For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death.

If you have ever said, "I shouldn't have..." and really meant it, you have expressed godly sorrow. It is a grief manifested for the purposes of God, which of course includes our own repentance. It also includes certain other things, such as grief for the sins and sorrows of others. A mother whose adult child is gone astray knows exactly what this means.

There are two other uses of grief; one of them is mourning for the dead. A Christian funeral is a celebration of hope, but it is also a time of grief for those who have lost someone they love. Is it unreasonable to say that the rest of us should be their comfort? This is probably the most immediate and practical help we can give, and it is certainly the most immediate and practical example of this beatitude.

¹ Matthew 13:45-46

² Matthew 13:24-30

³ Matthew 20:1-16

⁴ Matthew 25:1-13

Something which was taken for granted by the early church, and is greatly neglected today, is the sense of mourning for the state of the world. It is fashionable in the author's home church to pretend that the ills of society are none of our affair, a political mess to be handled by someone else. Rather, we should mourn and grieve over the state of our civilization. If you think we have nothing to grieve over, consider the millions of unborn children we slaughter every year. That alone should be cause for sorrow. But if we will mourn for those, can we not also be comforted? Are they not in the care of our Lord?

No Comfort Where There Is No Grief

Of course, we are not in the slightest interested in grief. We would much prefer to think that we don't need God to comfort us — because things are going great. Perhaps I might submit a contrary view:

- ✚ If you yourself have never been comforted in grief, how do you learn to comfort others in their grief? You may indeed be the fortunate one who never suffers any grief. But isn't that really a handicap when it comes to dealing with other people? If you want to play the game, you have to practice.
- ✚ When others comfort you, there is really nothing you can do to repay them. The only thing you can really do is pass that along. So it is that one person comforting another grows as it is passed on from person to person to person. Comfort is self multiplying.
- ✚ Jesus himself exhibited grief. He wept over Lazarus⁵; he wept over Jerusalem.⁶

Comfort by

Of course, there is the question of where this comfort comes from. There are, I submit, three primary sources:

- ✚ First is the comfort of Jesus himself, delivered in the form of the Holy Spirit. You must remember that Jesus is fully man; that means he understands your grief. He is not God the Father reigning on high, distant and unfeeling. He is rather God the Son who walked the same hot dusty earth that we do.
- ✚ For many Christians a great source of comfort is in the Scriptures themselves. This is particularly true in the Psalms. Sometimes we just need to be reminded of who God is and what he will do.
- ✚ Of course, if the church does what she should, she should be the source of comfort for all those in grief. Christianity is not a solo flight.

Gentle, Meek

The word used for gentle or meek is found in a couple of other instances:

- ✚ When Christ tells us to take his yoke upon us for he is gentle⁷ he uses this same word. So whatever else gentleness or meekness might include it certainly contains within it the gentleness of Christ.
- ✚ At the triumphal entry, Matthew records that Christ came in "gentle and mounted on the donkey"⁸ — which would seem to imply the gentleness and meekness, with the spirit of peace.

⁵ John 11:35-36

⁶ Matthew 23:37

⁷ Matthew 11:29

⁸ Matthew 21:5

The word itself seems to be somewhat difficult to explain. Robinson calls it the "gentleness of strength." It brings to mind the idea of a man who is superbly powerful in the physical sense, cradling a small infant in his arms. His power is not to impress but to protect; it's that kind of gentleness. Wesley saw it differently; he sought as that state of man in which "passions and affections are evenly balanced" — a man who has his emotions under complete control. Barnes remarks that such a person is patient in the reception of injuries — the kind of person whose pleasure it is to overlook the small insults and turns of life. We often forget that the word "gentleman" started with the idea of a gentle man. If you can conjure up in your mind the image of the old-fashioned Christian gentleman, you probably have a pretty good idea of what Christ was talking about.

Fruit of the Spirit

One of the curious to us which Christianity has taken lately is the "name it and claim it" version of the gospel. It holds that God is obliged, somehow, to provide to you every blessing which you can identify and claim. But this is not the gentleness which is a fruit of the Holy Spirit; such gentleness proceeds from a complete trust in God. I do not need to name it or claim it; He will provide it.

Indeed, if I show the fruit of the Spirit in my life should not be apparent that life's minor injuries and insults can be overlooked — for Christ's sake? The idea is not to be presumptuous, not always screaming "mine, mine, mine." Rather, we should be concerned about the needs of others.

Inherit the Earth

Christ promises such a person that he shall inherit the earth. Some writers see this as being fulfilled at the time of his second coming, when we shall see the new heaven and a new Earth. Certainly this is something we should expect. But is there more to it than that?

May I point out that the arrogant pass away but the meek continue? How often have we seen it that someone parades himself as a big shot on the local scene or the world scene, only to disappear a few months later? The proud have fallen for the lie of Satan, and think they can be like God. The Christian knows the truth on which that lie is based — that we have the privilege of imitating God. How can we do this? By the imitation of Christ, who was not only God but a man like us. Remember, you're just passing through — don't get suckered into the lie of Satan. The Christian wayfarer is meek, kind and gentle — just like his Lord.

Blessings – II - Matthew 5:6-8

Righteousness

Matthew 5:6 NASB "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Hunger and Thirst

If you accept the truth of this the attitude you are admitting something most interesting. You do not hunger and thirst after anything you already have. To say that this beatitude is true is to say that you do not have righteousness — but also to say that you will. The Christian understands this fairly clearly; it is clear statement that all of us are sinners. The final cure for this condition will not happen until our Lord returns. This, by the way, is one of several instances in which the beatitude cannot be fully and completely fulfilled until the return of Christ.

Miss Hornbuckle instructed me that words have meaning. In particular, the selection of verbs in your sentences can be highly indicative of hidden meaning. Notice that Jesus did not use the word "want." He used the phrase, "hunger and thirst." It is a stroke of genius in the language. It tells you that it is not sufficient to want righteousness; you have to be passionate about it. It has to be something that consumes your desires — and most important of all, drives out evil desire. Lawrence of Arabia once made the point that most Westerners don't know what hunger and thirst really are. As he had spent several days on a camel with neither food nor water, we may take his point as being one of experience. It's that kind of hunger and thirst that Jesus is talking about.

Why do we need to be so passionate about this? Because only when you hunger and thirst after righteousness do you drive out the opposite sin: covetousness. People who "want" can want many different things, such as the latest fashion, the fastest car, a bigger house and more money. It is precisely because the desire of these things cannot completely consume human desire that we can want so many at the same time. We can want any number of trivial things simultaneously; hunger and thirst limits the field quite a bit.

Righteousness

So how does one achieve righteousness? Remember that to the Jew of this time righteousness would be a legal status. You would achieve such status in one of two ways:

- ✚ First, you can achieve this by making the appropriate sacrifices at the Temple. This is not irrelevant to the Christian; the sacrifice of Christ on the cross replaced those sacrifices — so in a sense we still use the same method.
- ✚ Second, you achieve this by acting righteously. The Jew of this time understood that when you called someone a "good and righteous man" you were not saying that he had never sinned in his entire life. You were simply commenting on his lifestyle. There are lifestyles of the rich and famous; there is a lifestyle of the righteous too.

The first I leave to the Christian as being obvious. The real problem in our lives is the second method; we want to know how we can achieve a righteous lifestyle. The matter is one of the heart. If you want a righteous lifestyle you must have "right desires." Note, please, that this implies that your desires can be trained. This comes as a shock to the "if it feels good, do it" generation, I know. But it can

be done. This has a good deal to do with your state of poverty, as well. If your desires are such that nothing but the Cadillac and mansion will do, you can wind up being very poor and still have a lot of money.

Filled

Christ uses an interesting word for "filled." It's the same one that is used in the expression, "fatted calf." It means an animal that has been stuffed with food. This carries with it the implication that we can indeed be so filled with righteousness. If you've ever had the experience of pushing back from the table after the third piece of Thanksgiving pie, you have a pretty good idea of what this word means. In the same sense that bodily desire implies the existence of something which will fill it, spiritual desire implies the same thing. Christ is not promising us "just enough righteousness." He is promising us a Thanksgiving feast of righteousness. It makes sense, really. Did you expect that God would refuse to gratify the desire of the Christian who wants to be holy? To desire to be holy and righteous is to imitate God; he will always gratify that. Indeed, God's gifts are always greater than our desires could possibly be. If we hunger and thirst for it, we shall receive it — measure for measure, pressed down and running over.

Mercy

Matthew 5:7 NASB "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."

A Comparison with Compassion

The reader who does not attend the local church at which these lessons are delivered must pardon this interruption. Our new pastor has proclaimed three values for our church, one of which is, "Unleash Compassion." It is easy to confound mercy and compassion, and therefore we must spend a few moments making the distinction.

Compassion is at its roots a feeling — a "passion" modified by the predecessor "com" whose roots are the same as those of the word "community." It is a feeling; this accords well with the emerging church philosophy that Christianity is primarily an emotional experience. One of the commonplaces of emotions is that they cannot be sustained — but they can be called forth. The mental picture used here is that compassion is within us all the time, but only needs to be called forth or "unleashed." Mercy, on the other hand, is an act of the will. It is something you decide to do not because it feels good (which it usually does) but because it is the right thing to do. If you hunger and thirst after righteousness, you will be merciful — you can't help it.

As a particular point, compassion at our home church is something which is applied to large groups of anonymous people. Compassion for example includes aid to those in the Mathare Valley of Kenya, or those aided by a local interfaith agency giving food and financial aid to the poor.

What Is Mercy?

Mercy is defined somewhat differently. There are two elements possible in mercy:

- ✚ In common with compassion, mercy may mean charity towards the poor. It is not restricted, however, to a group endeavor. Mercy may mean giving money or food or other aid to an individual

with whom you are personally acquainted. As defined in our local church, this does not fit under the heading of compassion.

✚ Beyond that, mercy may also mean forgiveness.

You might well ask what these two activities have in common that makes them mercy. It is simply this: the beneficiary of mercy, in both of these instances, is often the victim of his own fault. The poor are often poor because of the dumb decisions they've made (or had made for them). When this is something that you are personally acquainted with, it's not uncommon to be angry about it. For example, if your 14-year-old daughter gets pregnant, it's likely that you're going to be upset. In your anger, you may decide to throw her out of the house and have nothing further to do with her. In your mercy, you would provide for her and for the baby. Please note that her pregnancy is not something which is a sin against you, dad. But it sure can make you mad.

Mercy, you see, has an opposing sin in both cases: vengeance. Listen to the various political debates about the poor, for example. How often have you heard that poverty is their own fault, they're just lazy, and what we really need to do is to punish them for being poor so they'll go out and get a job? That's vengeance. It's just a little easier to see when "the poor" really means that 14-year-old.

So of course we come to the question of why vengeance is prohibited. After all, shouldn't we set those poor people straight? Remember what vengeance is: stealing from God. Here's how he puts it:

Romans 12:19 NASB Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," says the Lord.

If you take vengeance, you take that which God explicitly tells you belongs to him. You are to leave it to the wrath of God — which sometimes is superseded by his mercy. And blessed are the merciful.

Forgive Us Our Debts

So mercy inclines us to forgiveness. As our Lord said, this is a 7 x 70 process. But it's a very profitable one for us — because we exchange human mercy, fallible as it is, for divine mercy which is perfect. The blessing given to us here is not one of an exchange of equal value. Rather, it is an exchange of our best effort for his complete mercy. Valued as a bargain, this is an enormously good deal.

So why is it that so many of us have such trouble being merciful? I suspect it is because we are rather dour about it. Listen to what St. Paul says about it:

Romans 12:8 NASB or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

Why do we need mercy with cheerfulness? It's because in most cases of mercy it's easy to see that the problem we are trying to remedy is the other guy's fault. We can very often say that if they hadn't been so stupid they wouldn't be in this mess. And we come back to that question of vengeance; what we really want to do is to get even with him for bothering us with his needs. Chrysostom went so far as to say that the man who gives charity (that is, mercy) on behalf of the church should be a cheerful giver — because otherwise he's going to be a real sourpuss really fast. (I am happy to report that the individual responsible for this at our home church is the model of a cheerful giver.)

The Imitation of God

One thing is very certain: the attribute of mercy is a beautiful adornment to the Christian. Nothing so exemplifies the life of God within the Christian as the mercy the Christian shows. Virtually every religion commands mercy; virtually everyone believes that mercy is a good thing, especially when it is the matter of charity. It is the law of the moral world (the universe is a moral place, what goes around comes around) that the merciful deserve and often get mercy.

It's more than that. Let me give you an example. When asked to comment on the subject, Robert E Lee said that he surrendered as much to the mercy of Abraham Lincoln as to the armies of Ulysses Grant. Students of the Civil War know that he could have sparked a guerrilla resistance. Instead he relied on the mercy of Abraham Lincoln. Regrettably, Andrew Johnson was not Abraham Lincoln.

Mercy, you see, is simply a manifestation of our love for others. If you love others, it is hard not to be merciful. And as in all these things, if you call upon God for aid he will be pleased to provide you with the heart of mercy. He is always pleased to help his children grow.

Pure in Heart

Matthew 5:8 NASB "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Metaphor

By its very definition, the pure heart is difficult to see. Permit me, then, an old metaphor. If you want to see something, you need the right instrument for your vision. If you're looking for bacteria, you need a microscope. If you're looking at stars, a telescope is more appropriate.

Let me give you a word of warning about telescopes. In most sporting goods stores and several other establishments you can purchase what is advertised to be a "3 inch refractor telescope." The lens in this telescope is indeed 3 inches in diameter. But it's a cheap lens, and suffers from what is called chromatic aberration. I won't go into the physics, but what it does is make the various colors form an indistinct image when those colors passed through the edge area of the lens. So they take a ring of cardboard, about an inch in width, and insert in front of the lens. This corrects the chromatic aberration — but also reduces the effective size of the lens. (Telescopes based on mirrors do not have this problem.) The telescope looks fine, but you're not getting what is advertised.

That's the method that many of us want to use to deceive God. We're perfectly willing to look like the right instrument, but on the inside we are cheap and shoddy. Christ is quite clear here: the only instrument that works for seeing God is indeed the pure heart. Sin clouds the telescope looking at God.

So what should we be looking at? Paul puts it this way:

Ephesians 1:18-19 NASB I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, (19) and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might

If you think this is not particularly useful, examine the three things that Paul says you should be able to see:

- ✚ The first is hope – without which the Christian cannot live.
- ✚ The second is the riches of God's glory. If you cannot see his glory, you are deceived about the values of the universe.
- ✚ And of course there is his power; you need to see just who's in charge here.

Reaction of Purity

Sometimes you need to test: do you really have this purity of heart? There are two men in the Bible who understand the real test of purity quite clearly: Isaiah and Peter. In the sixth chapter of Isaiah, the prophet Isaiah sees the Lord seated on his throne and immediately knows: he is impure. Peter looks at his Lord after calming the sea and asks him to go away because Peter is an unclean man. When you see the purity of God, you know your own impurity. But there is hope; God is abundantly gracious and will deal with the problem within you.

How do you know when he's being successful at it? How do you know when he is making you pure? Here is the biblical test:

Psalms 18:25-26 NASB With the kind You show Yourself kind; With the blameless You show Yourself blameless; (26) With the pure You show Yourself pure, And with the crooked You show Yourself astute.

When you can see the purity of God within yourself, shining through, it is evidence that he is working his purity through you. You may find that you become a lot less suspicious; you see the good rather than the evil at first glance.

Of course, it's easy to tell when you don't have purity. Hypocrisy is quite easy to find and quite easy to identify — in everyone but yourself.

At the Resurrection

If you mention purity to the ancient Jew his mind would immediately go to the ritual purification required for a priest to enter the Temple. If you mention this in the context of seeing God, he would think of the high priest who could go in and see the Ark of the Covenant once a year. But this is only a symbol of what was to come. The fact that it happened once a year was symbolic of an eternal fact to come: once the Lord returns, he will be with us for all of eternity. We will see God. As Job put it,

Job 19:25-27 NASB "As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, And at the last He will take His stand on the earth. (26) "Even after my skin is destroyed, Yet from my flesh I shall see God; (27) Whom I myself shall behold, And whom my eyes will see and not another. My heart faints within me!

Ultimately, the pure in heart will see God at the resurrection — and we will see him face to face. As Paul said,

1 Corinthians 13:12 NASB (12) For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known.

The pure in heart are those who are solid in the faith; they're not looking for a workaround, they are trying to do it God's way. If you are such a person, you will see the unseen things of God today – and know him face to face when Christ returns.

Blessings – III - Matthew 5:9-12

Peacemaking — Expensive Hobby

Matthew 5:9 NIV Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

Peace-with Whom?

It is a fact: most of us are up for a good fight. When the human species finally begins to consider peace as a desirable thing, is usually in the context of peace with somebody. We don't normally think of ourselves as wanting peace with everybody; we just want peace with the guy who's beating us up now. But the Christian lifestyle is that of a peacemaker and that of a peaceful man. Therefore, we should consider with who we should be at peace at all times.

- ✚ Most importantly, we should be at peace with God. This is the foundation on which all other Christian peace is built. Like beauty, peace proceeds from within. It is therefore not possible to be at peace with anything outside yourself if you are not at peace with God within. You understand this by observation; have you ever seen a man who just couldn't avoid an argument, a fight, a brawl? If you know the man, you know that there is no peace within — and therefore there is no peace outside, either.
- ✚ Almost as important is peace within the church. Surprisingly, this necessary for the salvation of others. It is a fact that the world knows that we are Christians by the way we love one another.⁹ This is one of the great ways in which it is seen that being a Christian is a desirable thing. People who are unimpressed by apologetics are sometimes stunned by the way we love each other.
- ✚ In the outer circle there is peace with the world. In general, it is not given to the Christian to be a bickering man. We must sometimes disagree, but even this can be done peacefully — if you practice it.

The source of peace, simply, is Christ:

Ephesians 2:11-17 NIV Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men)— (12) remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. (13) But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. (14) For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, (15) by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, (16) and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. (17) He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.

The source of war is the sinfulness of man; the solution to war in all its forms is the grace of Jesus Christ.

Prerequisites

As we have been taking the Beatitudes rather slowly, we sometimes forget that they are all connected. The previous three Beatitudes are the prerequisites of peacemaking.

⁹ John 13:35

- ✚ Righteousness — if your hands are dirty it is difficult for the world to see you as a peacemaker. Rather, they see you as one who has a hidden agenda and not to be trusted. Let your righteousness shine before men, if for no other reason than this will help you to make peace.
- ✚ Mercy — would you like the supreme example? Robert E Lee said that he surrendered as much to the mercy of Abraham Lincoln as he did to Grant's armies. This is why he considered the assassination of Lincoln to be such a great blow to the South. Even the prodigal son knew he would be welcomed home.
- ✚ Purity — especially if you are trying to mediate a dispute, purity is essential. That both parties understand that you have no hidden agenda, just the desire for peace, is essential to their trust of you.

Peacemaking — an Example

Let me give you a great example of peacemaking. Her name is Abigail; you can find the story in First Samuel chapter 25. Put briefly, Abigail corrects her husband's churlish behavior by acting behind his back. She forestalls David taking bloody vengeance by doing what her husband should've done in the first place. May I point out three aspects of this?

- ✚ She was swift to act. So many of us are willing to make peace, but only after we fret for a few weeks. She understood the urgency of the situation, and knew that it was only going to get worse as time passed — so she acted immediately.
- ✚ She knew that her husband was in the wrong; so therefore she was penitent on his behalf — both in word and in deed. There are two things that are important here; the first, of course, is penitence. If you are wrong, admit it and make amends. But notice that she does this on behalf of her husband (who disagrees). Sometimes you have to be the penitent for someone else. Peacemaking is an expensive hobby.
- ✚ When she puts the matter to David, she does so in terms of David and his relationship with God. She does not plead her own case, much less that of her husband. It reminds me of my mother, who often began her arguments with the phrase, "if you consider yourself a Christian..." Peace begins with your relationship with God.

Persecution for Righteousness

Matthew 5:10 NIV Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Reaction to Righteousness

Consider what I call the "cockroach principle." When you turn the lights on, the cockroaches scatter. Spiritually, righteousness is light — and the cockroaches don't like it. Usually they scatter, but sometimes they fight back. We need to examine the reactions that the people of the world have to righteousness.

One of the oldest examples concerns Cain and Abel. Put shortly, Cain kills his brother because his own sacrifices were not acceptable to God, but Abel's were. He didn't like the competition, so he got rid of it. He was a little surprised when God was upset with him about it; we seem to think that our self interest is sufficient as justification for practically any sin. From the Christian perspective, it's a warning. Just being confronted with righteousness — not an in your face righteousness, but just day-to-day righteousness — people have a tendency to strike out and destroy. You need to watch this.

More commonly today, however is the art of intimidation. We live in what purports to be a civilized society; putting a bullet in your neighbor's head tends to involve the police department and great deal of legal bother. So if you keep that righteous person shut up by intimidation, you get the same effect without the bullets. Most Christians understand this very well. If you are the only Christian at your workplace, expect to be ridiculed for your faith and criticized as "holier than thou."

A more recent development — at least in our society — is that of the fake martyr. This is the poor, courageous homosexual who knows that every Christian is just waiting around the corner with a lead pipe to beat him or her to a pulp. Of course, they go on righteously and in a self-deprecating manner point out that courage. After all, with all those villainous Christians out there, a lesbian just can't be too careful. You can see this in the newspapers pretty much every day; a homosexual who speaks out against Christianity is called "bold"; a Christian who replies is called "bigoted."

A Good Thing?

It would be extremely convenient of Christ not to have brought this subject up. Most of us don't like the idea of being persecuted; most of us don't like the idea that it's going to happen to us whether we like it or not. And practically all of us start with the impression that there is no real benefit to it. That makes it surprising when Christ starts his words with, "blessed." So what possible benefits are there to being persecuted for the sake of righteousness?

- ✚ I hate to tell you this, but suffering is a part of this world. You are going to suffer. But your heavenly father knows that you can only handle so much suffering. He has also provided you the choice in why you will suffer. If you decide to be a bank robber, you're going to suffer with prison. Do you not see that it is better to suffer for being righteous than for being wicked? You do have some choice about it; choose wisely. Suffering is a form of practice in the Christian life. Practice is painful — make it count.
- ✚ Suffering perfects you, in the biblical sense.¹⁰ Remember that the word "perfect" doesn't mean that you are sinless; rather, it means that you are polished and suited for a particular task.
- ✚ Finally, there is the promise of reward. Yours is the kingdom of heaven — or, to put it in a sports metaphor, you made the team!

Courage-the Foundation of Virtue

Most of us shy away from the talk of persecution because we don't think we have the courage to face it. We look at the great martyrs of the church, we admire them, but we don't think we have what they had inside. Perhaps we are wrong:

2 Timothy 1:7 NIV For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.

I would point out to you that our reactions are based on the courage we think we have. Christ tells us to react on the basis of the spirit he will give us. It is a spirit of power; so there is the sense that we actually can do the job. We can face the persecution; the courage will be there. But it is also a spirit of love. That means that we must bear that love even to those who are persecuting us. We cannot react in hatred, but we must remember that those were persecuting us were designed to be children of God

¹⁰ James 1:2-4

just as we are. The war is not over when you have defeated the enemy in battle; the war is over when you have made your enemy your friend. To do this we shall require self-discipline — and he will give us that too.

We might take our motto of the Royal Navy: fear God and dread naught. For if you fear God, what else can you possibly fear?

Persecuted for the Name

Matthew 5:11-12 NASB "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. (12) "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

What the World Will Do

It sometimes comes as a great surprise to new Christians to find that the world will attack you and persecute you just because you have the name "Christian." You don't have to do anything; all you have to do is bear the label. Here's what you should expect:

- ✚ They are going to insult you. If you haven't heard, "they are all hypocrites", you just haven't been listening. The world has a way of doing this so that sounds like it's behind your back — but they want to make sure you're listening. You're also going to get, "wild eyed right wing fundamentalists." There are several variations on this. Remember, you don't have to do anything to deserve this; all you have to do is be a real Christian.
- ✚ They're going to persecute you. This sounds a little difficult in modern America, but persecution is a little more subtle than it was in the early Roman Empire. It is most common on the job. People who are real Christians suddenly find themselves "not to be trusted." It's a curious thing. If you're the person who walks into the room and all the obscenity stops, those who just stop talking are the ones who get you back. This applies even if you didn't say anything about the obscenities — and usually, you don't have to. There may be a reason you're getting all the dirt jobs.
- ✚ Most commonly, however, you will be the recipient of false accusations. Often enough these will be whispered behind your back, taken as fact by the management, and dealt with severely — leaving you to wonder what on earth you did wrong. Expect it. (This, by the way, is a good reason not to believe the rumors you hear about your fellow Christians at work. Judge not.)

Sharing the suffering of Christ

The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church. We often forget that the word "martyr" originates in the Greek word for same, which means "witness." So when you suffer for the name of Christ, even to the point of bloodshed, you are sharing in the sufferings of Christ. Most of us are not "great men." But does not mean we cannot imitate such a man. Most of us are small people; if you're going to be great, it's going to be in a small way. But we should not neglect the chance to be great in that small way. For the Christian, this means sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

Think about it: most of us are not smart enough to become great theologians; most of us are not disciplined enough to become great Saints; most of us are just us. But there is one thing we can do which we have in common with those who are great: we can suffer nobly. Suffering is something that comes to you, not something that you create — at least, if you have your sanity. But when it comes we

have a choice about our reaction to it. We can whine and complain, or if we are suffering for the name of Christ we can accept it, thank God for it, and endure it as Christ would endure it.

He knows that you need to be rewarded for that. Here's what he promises you:

Romans 8:16-17 NASB The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, (17) and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.

2 Timothy 2:12 KJV If we suffer, we shall also reign with him: if we deny him, he also will deny us:

He promises glory and dominion; heady stuff.

Reward

The problem most Christians have with this is that the reward seems to be one which is entirely heavenly. It could hardly be otherwise, if you think about it. If suffering for the name of Christ caused you to suddenly glow-in-the-dark, so that everyone would know what a great Christian you are, can you imagine the effects? But he does understand that you need reward; he also understands that you need the acknowledgment of suffering. Let me point out two passages to you.

1 Peter 4:14 NASB If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

You should at least have the sense that suffering for the name of Christ means that you are on the team. Those who have played any kind of competitive sport understand this. The practices are often grueling and painful. It's like the Marines say: "pain is weakness leaving the body." It's more than that for the Christian. Suffering for the name means that you have made the team, the only team that counts eternally.

This will be more apparent when our Lord returns.

Matthew 16:27 NASB "For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and WILL THEN REPAY EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS.

God is just; he is fair. When people ask me why I believe that Christ will return and judge the living and the dead, I usually answer something like this. "Do you believe that Adolf Hitler got what he deserved?" Most people don't think he did. "Do you believe that God is righteous and just?" Most people do. So the choice comes down to either God is not just, or God is not powerful enough to straighten out Adolf Hitler as he deserves, or God isn't finished yet. Christ explicitly tells us that God isn't finished yet — but the day is coming when he will bring justice. In that day your suffering for righteousness sake, for the name of Christ, for the kingdom of God will be rewarded as only God can reward. Hope is still a virtue.

Salt and Light - Matthew 5:13-20

Salt and Light

Matthew 5:13-16 NASB "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. (14) "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; (15) nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. (16) "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

Christ's Use of Metaphor

It is easily observed that Jesus was fond of the use of metaphor, even stretching it out into parables. This occasionally causes some difficulty for certain Christians who believe that the use of metaphor should be viewed with suspicion. This is particularly true when the metaphor turns into allegory. The truth is relatively simple: metaphor is good teaching technique, especially when you're talking about things which are spiritual. Why?

- ✚ It's a great teaching tool for those who are simpleminded. There is no need for a textbook type explanation; it's a simple statement.
- ✚ There is also the issue of translation. Sometimes that which is clear in the Greek is fuzzy in the English. Salt, however, is salt.
- ✚ As has been shown in recent research, the use of metaphor taps into the human brain at a very deep level. Most of us make frequent use of the mental working model; the metaphor fits this pattern very well.

Each metaphor has, so to speak, a subject and an object. As long as we don't turn the object into a literal usage, the metaphor can be understood in a number of ways. Perhaps that's another reason why Christ used them so frequently.

Salt

It is a characteristic of Christ's teaching that he uses metaphors that are common and simple. Salt is good example:

- ✚ It doesn't take a lot of salt to flavor something. It shouldn't take too many Christians to change the character of the society around them.
- ✚ Salt is used to cleanse and purify (have you ever gargled with salt water?) So the Christian should be one who cleanses and purifies the society around him.

Those who first heard the Sermon on the Mount would also see that salt was something that was intimately involved in the Old Testament style of worship. Most offerings required salt in them; God's covenant with Israel was called a "covenant of salt", because it was intended to be an eternal covenant. Taken together, we see the character of the Christian is one which changes the society around them, purifying it. It is an interesting question as to whether or not this applies to Christians acting as a group in a political democracy.

But sometimes that characteristic is missing from the Christian. The salt, per the metaphor, loses its flavor. How can this be done?

- ✚ One way is by dilution. Salt has a rather strong flavor, but if you mix it with enough other stuff it can get lost. Similarly, if it's a small number of Christians we are talking about, it's easy for them to lose their effect on the society.
- ✚ The other way is by pollution, or corruption. We see this in the church which adopts of the ways of the world with a knowing wink. If you think this doesn't happen today, ask yourselves this: what is the practical attitude of my church towards divorce? I suspect it will make an interesting comparison with what Christ taught.

In a phrase which has passed into the English language, we are to be the salt of the earth. Think about that description for a minute. When you tell me that someone is "the salt of the earth," you are usually telling me about somebody who is uncomplicated, loyal and trustworthy, and, well, "salt of the earth." Does that really describe the Christian of today?

Light

Christ tells us that we are the light of the world. Very well then; let's examine the characteristics of light.

- ✚ It is impossible to have dirty light. It simply doesn't exist. Light is always pure — and the same should be said for the Christian.
- ✚ We also use the word to indicate our understanding, as in "we've seen the light." We use it figuratively to mean that we understand something. The Christian is to be that light so that the other people in this world can understand who God is and what he has done for them.
- ✚ Perhaps you've never thought of it this way, but have you ever tried to hide a flashlight when it's turned on? If your mother has ever caught you reading comic books under the bed covers by flashlight, you understand the problem. Light just naturally shows up and is visible. It should be the same way with the Christian. You shouldn't have to try to be the light the world; you just are. And if you're not, something's wrong.

While he was with us bodily, Christ describes himself as the light of the world. That alone should be enough to convince you that you should imitate your Lord, for you now are the light of the world as well. We are to be the example to the world of what God is like. The only way to do this is the imitation of Christ; we are lesser lights, but lights nonetheless.

Let the lower lights be burning,
 Send the gleam across the wave.
 Some poor fainting, struggling seaman
 You may rescue, you may save.

So what's the point of all this? Simple enough: we are to be such an example to the world that the world will see our good deeds and praise and glorify God for them. The purpose of being salt and light is not to bring credit upon ourselves but glory to God.

Fulfill the Law and the Prophets

Matthew 5:17-19 NASB "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. (18) "For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. (19) "Whoever

then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

At first glance, this passage appears to be one of the most difficult in the New Testament. In fact, it is one of the boldest.

Fulfill the Law

In a very real and explicit sense, Jesus Christ fulfilled the Old Testament law. What does that mean? To fulfill something implies that the something was not yet complete. There are two areas in which the law was clearly not complete:

- ✚ First, there is the matter of the atonement. Even in the Old Testament was recognized that the sacrifice of animals was not sufficient for sin; it was simply the best available. The Jew understood that the animal could not pay for his sins, but that God accepted that sacrifice if offered in a proper spirit. The fundamental problem was still there — human life for human sin. That human life was Jesus of Nazareth, who made the atonement of our sins on the Cross.
- ✚ While it may be obscure, there is also the matter of the High Priest. Among human beings it is fairly obvious that God listens only to the righteous. It's bad enough when the ordinary righteous (you and me, I hope) go to speak to him; he might be kind enough and gracious enough to listen. But if you want to represent the entire people to God the standards are higher. That's why there was one high priest; in effect God was saying only one man will do. That man is Jesus of Nazareth.

A more detailed and full explanation of this is given in the letter to the Hebrews. The reader is encouraged to explore the subject.

Fulfill the Prophets

The question of how Christ Jesus fulfills the prophets is much easier to answer. Prophets, after all, are in the business of prophecy. There are quite literally hundreds of prophecies about the Christ to come which have already been fulfilled. Space does not allow us to provide a complete list of these prophecies; most of you will have a Bible with printed assistance in it; start with that. There are three things, however, that I think are most pertinent:

- ✚ The prophets foretold the coming of the Messiah, the Holy One of Israel. Christ fulfilled this.
- ✚ The prophets foretold the coming of the kingdom of God — and Christ fulfilled this by establishing his church.
- ✚ The prophets foretold that there would be a new covenant¹¹. We have gone from the covenant of law to the covenant of grace.

We are, of course, rushing through this at a horrific pace. To do so we have touched only the highlights.

Creative Endeavor

The problem most people have with this entire section is that they seek some sense of fulfillment which is a matter of putting round pegs in round holes. God is not so limited as that. When he fulfills, he does so in the same sense as he did at the beginning: as a creator. It is an artistic endeavor.

¹¹ Jeremiah 31:31-34

- ✚ Note, please, that what Christ does is completely in accord with the Old Testament. Despite what some modern scholars think, there is no sense that the God of the Old Testament is indeed a cruel and was somehow appeased by his disobedient son sacrificing himself. The two of them are one; Therefore the way Christ goes about fulfilling the law and the prophets is completely in accord with the Old Testament. He has not invented a "new morality." He has amplified and brought to fruition the morality already proclaimed. This is why we use the Old Testament as a guideline what is right and wrong, even though we are under the New Testament.
- ✚ There is a sense of style about this too. If you enjoy listening to Bach, Haydn is a natural step. His style is different, but he speaks in the same musical tradition. So do Beethoven and Tchaikovsky. In our time we have seen musicians deviate from this great tradition and wonder why their works do not sell. There's a lesson in here someplace. Christ does not innovate as much as he completes.
- ✚ You might interject that Christ has created the church, which is an entirely new thing. Not so. If you understand the nation of Israel to be the people of God, then you understand the church to be an extension of that concept. The house of Israel includes all the Jews — anyone from any of the 12 tribes. The house of God, the church, includes all who call him Christ and mean it. It is an extension, and a very logical one, of the original concept.

Exceed the Righteousness

Matthew 5:20 NASB "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Literal Sense

When Christ first said this, his hearers were probably astonished. But there is any one thing the Pharisees were noted for, it was their righteousness. When the Pharisees observed one of the Old Testament laws it was done with complete meticulousness. They probably thought that no one ever exceed such righteousness. But as Christ points out over the course of his ministry there are several flaws in these people. We may identify four as being particularly deadly to the Christian.

- ✚ "Say and do not." The Pharisees preached a good sermon but didn't always follow what they preached with their practice. That happens to anybody who preaches; it's when it doesn't bother you that it's deadly. It didn't bother them.
- ✚ They did things for show – particularly items of religious ritual. They wanted people to know how religious they were. As Christ said, they had their reward for this.
- ✚ They kept some parts of the law quite strictly — and for other parts they found loopholes. The most prominent example would be in caring for their parents.
- ✚ Finally, there was their great love of money. Sadly enough, they interpreted having a large amount of money as a clear sign of God's favor.

It's fairly easy to tell people not to fall for these things. It's easy to tell them that you can exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees if you don't follow these things. The hard part is to look within yourself and see whether or not you have the same failings.

Completely Righteous

The problem in this passage, of course, is it seems to demand of us a complete and perfect righteousness. The Pharisees were the most righteous people the ancient Jews knew. In their view, being more righteous than that was for all practical purposes an impossibility. The point can be rather deep.

- ✦ Ever since the time of Saint Augustine we have considered the concept of original sin. Basically, this means that you are born with the sin of Adam within you. You therefore have no chance whatever to be completely righteous. Therefore, this command of Christ is impossible to fulfill. (It should be noted that there are some Protestant denominations who do not agree about the existence of original sin.)
- ✦ More to the practical point, the Scripture assures us that all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. It doesn't matter whether or not you had original sin; if you're old enough to read this, you are a sinner. You are not perfectly righteous. (Neither am I.)
- ✦ These thoughts do not exempt us from attempting to be reasonably righteous. The Christian knows that true and perfect righteousness is the work only of God by the grace of Christ. Without the Cross there is no true righteousness. But that doesn't mean we should go around sinning like idiots; rather, we should be as righteous as we are able to be. As my drill Sergeant used to put it, "get with the program."

Recipients of Grace

As every Christian should know, it is possible to be more righteous than the Pharisees; more righteous than the most righteous person you know. That method depends not upon our efforts but upon the love of God, poured out for us at the Cross. The God who is entitled to pass judgment upon our actions sent his son to die at Calvary so that we might be the recipients of his love, not his judgment. Only in the blood of Christ can we have the righteousness which God demands. By his love he has found a way to do this. That way is called grace, and we must ever remember that it is by grace we are saved, through faith, not by what we do. Be as righteous as you can be; ask God for his aid in your righteousness — but remember the source of true righteousness: the Cross.

Anger Management - Matthew 5:21-26

You Have Heard It Said

Matthew 5:21-22 NASB "You have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' (22) "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.

The Lord

A frequent misunderstanding of our Lord's teaching is that he somehow brought to the world a new form of morality. This is not the case; he is the author of the Old Testament in the final sense, and he cannot contradict himself. We may see this here by his opening remark: "You have heard that the ancients were told." He is, of course, quoting from the Ten Commandments. In so doing he acknowledges the authority of the Old Testament. It is important to note that Christ came to complete and fulfill the law of the Old Testament, not to set it aside. For example, homosexuality is condemned in the Old Testament; it is therefore logical that it would be condemned in the New Testament as well.

What would've been surprising to the listeners, however, is the phrase, "But I say to you..." They would be accustomed to hearing rabbinical teaching in which the Rabbi would comment on the Old Testament law, rendering his opinion as to how it would be applied in a particular circumstance. But Jesus speaks as one with authority. You cannot accept his sayings without accepting his authority — though this has often been done. What he is doing is extending the Old Testament. The Old Testament law looked upon the actual actions of the sinner and passed judgment on them. But even in the Old Testament it was clear that God looked upon the heart (as he mentioned the Samuel in connection with selecting David as the king.) Jesus is making the logical extension that the thought is what gives birth to the action. Therefore, it is the thought that God (and God alone) will judge.

It is interesting in this connection to note that this is the first mention of hell in the gospel of Matthew. It is characteristic of the New Testament that hell is almost always reserved as a subject for the teaching of Christ himself. Apostolic teaching does not extend what Christ taught, it merely repeats it. Considering the role anger plays in so much sin, it is perhaps fitting that the first time we hear of hell from the lips of Jesus is in the context of anger.

The Anger

Most of us are accustomed to thinking of anger purely in the emotional sense. It is often justified on the grounds that it is an emotion and there is nothing we can do about it. What your grandmother used to call "self control" is now referred to as psychological repression. This, we all know, will warp your little psyche. But to this we may raise two objections:

- ✚ First, the idea that self-control is a negative thing is a product of our time. Most Christians of most places and most times would have been shocked at the idea. They would have assumed that self-control was a normal part of growing up.
- ✚ Second, anger as emotion is the father of action — and the action in question is usually vengeance. Vengeance belongs to the Lord. Thou shalt not steal.

We do make the distinction between anger as an emotion, and anger as an action. It's just that we need to note that both of them are condemned as sinful. But we should also note that there is a degree of judgment involved here. Christ gives us three levels of punishment. The first is referred to simply as "the court." That was a local court composed of three judges at the time — and it had the authority to issue capital punishment, by strangling or hanging. The Supreme Court was identical with the Sanhedrin; they could have you stoned to death. Hell — well I assume you know something about that. It teaches us that there are degrees of punishment; this also teaches us that things get worse as the sin gets worse. In short, curb your anger as quickly as possible before things get worse.

There is one word of caution we must bring in here. We have often heard of "righteous anger." I would submit to you that righteous anger has within it some subtle temptations.

- ✚ Righteous anger is best reserved for anger against an offense committed on someone else. It is very difficult to be both righteous and angry when the person who is offended is you.
- ✚ We must always remember to be angry about the offense — but not the offender. Your kindergarten teacher taught you to love the sinner and hate the sin; she was right.

The Victim

It is interesting to note that the phrase translated "you good for nothing" in the passage above can also be translated "blockhead." The original meaning is something like "empty headed." The accusation means that the person is worthless. But remember that that worthless person is a child of God (recall that Jesus is talking about what you say to your brother) and is not empty, but filled with the Holy Spirit. We sometimes forget who we are.

The concept that we should not be angry with our brothers should have been fairly obvious from the Beatitudes; for in them we are commanded to pray for those who persecute us. If you pray for those who persecute you, how much more should you care for those who are your Christian brothers? So why do we have such problems with this? I submit that the apostle James tells us the answer:

James 3:4-8 NASB Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. (5) So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! (6) And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. (7) For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. (8) But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.

If You Remember

Matthew 5:23-24 NASB "Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, (24) leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.

At the Altar

Christ assumed that his hearers would know what it was like to present a gift at the altar. It would be a normal part of Jewish worship. It's something you would do on a regular basis, and I think

that's why he selected it. It's like a pop-up reminder on your computer's calendar; it's going to come up. For most Christians today this does not seem to apply; after all, we pass an offering basket rather than approaching an altar. But I would submit that a similar opportunity still does exist — at communion. The apostle commands us to examine ourselves at communion, and certainly we should remember such things at that time. Is it unreasonable to seek reconciliation before you take communion?

What you may have missed about this is that Christ is asking you about your memory. Anger is one thing; the memory of anger is entirely another. The memory of anger is something that can be pulled up and chewed like a cud. Do you not see that this is a greater sin? You can be angry once; you can chew on it for the rest of your life. So if your brother has anything against you, reconcile as quickly and completely as possible. If you cannot reconcile, at least forgive what ever offense they may have made against you – and ask God to forgive those offenses you have made against them. Blessed are the peacemakers – and that includes you making peace with your brother.

How God Sees It

We must take it is obvious that God desires harmony in his church. This is clear from his innate character; God is one. Anything that he creates, therefore, has integrity (oneness.) He desires that his church has that same integrity and oneness, which implies complete harmony.

The fascinating fact is that God prefers the harmony of his church to his own glory. For certainly it is clear that bringing an offering to the altar of God is to bring glory to God, and if he prefers that we don't do that but should rather reconcile with our brother we understand his priorities. The harmony of his church comes before the offerings which bring him glory.

But there's more to it than that. You can also look at it this way: if he will not accept an offering from you at his altar because you are not in fellowship with your brothers, how great an evil it must be to have strife in the church! If you present your gift anyway and let the strife go on, do you think God will look upon your gift with favor? God's requirement for the church is that we be one, just as he is one.

Why Should I Reconcile?

Sometimes we need to be a little blunt about this. Anger consumes people, and they tend to justify themselves as not needing reconciliation. But here's why you need to do it:

- ✚ If love of your Christian brother is not enough, consider that your failure to reconcile hinders the perfection of your work in the church.
- ✚ If love is not enough, consider that you are breaking fellowship with God and with man. Your worship will not be acceptable to him.
- ✚ Finally, if love is not enough, there exist hell and judgment.

Make Friends Quickly

Matthew 5:25-26 NASB "Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. (26) "Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent.

Facts of the Time

Christ now changes his point of view from that of your Christian brother to that of your opponent at law. We may assume that he is not talking about your Christian brother, as the Scripture does forbid us to go to law with each other (an often forgotten point.) We need to understand some facts about the time which explain why this verse would be so clear to the people then.

- ✚ The ancient world was rather strict about the collecting of debts. Indeed, the institution of debtor's prison was a fact of life up through the 18th-century at least. If you couldn't pay your debts when call for, the man who made the loan at the right to have you thrown in prison until you did. This seems counterproductive to the modern mind, but remember that the institution of the family was much stronger then. The likelihood was that some of your family would get together and cover your debt. This, of course, had its complications within the family as well.
- ✚ If the simple fact of being imprisoned was not sufficient, it was also permissible to torture the debtor. Again, the idea was to get the man's family to pony up the money. Most of us would react to this with horror, but remember that in the ancient world torture was considered a legitimate form of treatment for witnesses, debtors and criminals. Crucifixion, for example, was just as fatal as the electric chair — but a great deal more painful.

In fact, the advice that Christ is giving here is something which is repeated in Jewish lore. It would've struck his listeners as being pretty obvious advice. Perhaps he intended it for the rest of us.

Who Is the Opponent?

This particular passage has been spiritualized in a number of ways. Some view the opponent here as being God himself; in that instance you are to agree with him in this life before the "court" — that is, the judgment. Another view holds that the opponent is the devil — and that baptism we agreed not to follow him. Following this type of interpretation, this passage has been used as proof positive of the existence of purgatory and (on the other hand) proof positive of universal salvation.

All of this is interesting historically, but the plain sense the passage is quite enough. This passage talks about an opponent who is a man, but not a brother. It refers to the people who persecute us; the people who think us stupid and silly; the people who think they are mentally much better than we are because we have this silly belief. In all these instances we are to make friends; to be the people of peace. We are the salt of the earth, and we should act like it.

What to Do

So if we think about it, we see our duty clearly. Remember that the judge in a court is an agent of the government. Governments are instituted by God for his purposes. For example, governments bring peace during which the gospel of Christ spreads more easily. The judge in particular is there to punish the criminal and resolve civil disputes. In this particular instance we are talking about a civil dispute.

So what should we do? The phrase given here is, "make friends." The original in the Greek has as its root word the Greek word for "benevolent." This is difficult for the Christian, particularly if you happen to be the person who thinks that you have the right side of this case. But Christ prizes peace and harmony above justice. Why? Because peace and harmony lead to eternal things; you winning a civil suit is a matter for this life only. He wants you focused on eternal things.

We are the ambassadors of reconciliation. We ought to act the part. Let our first concern when disputing with our neighbors be that of reconciliation and peacemaking, rather than squeezing the last penny out of the man who has offended us. We should not simply fold our arms and glare at our opponent, demanding the last ounce of justice. For one thing, the civil judge is not perfect — you could be the one being squeezed. Secondly at issue here might be the salvation of your opponent versus the pennies in your pockets. Let us be peacemakers while we can.

You Have Heard It Said - Matthew 5:27-48

Divorce and Adultery

Matthew 5:27-37 NASB "You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY'; (28) but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (29) "If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. (30) "If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell. (31) "It was said, 'WHOEVER SENDS HIS WIFE AWAY, LET HIM GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE'; (32) but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (33) "Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS, BUT SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE LORD.' (34) "But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, (35) or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING. (36) "Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. (37) "But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything beyond these is of evil.

Adultery

It is difficult for this author to write about this subject at this time. The pastor at our church recently preached a sermon on divorce. To put it simply, I was shocked at the number of reasons he associated with the concept of adultery. Pornography is no good thing, but is it cause for divorce? He also chose to include the Pauline exception of abandonment as cause for divorce — and then included any number of forms of abandonment. Let me counsel the husbands: don't spend too much time on your stamp collection. You may get served with divorce papers.

Not wishing to start a church fight, let me state simply how we are to deal with adultery.

- ✚ First, adultery means any sex outside of marriage. If you are married and have sex with someone other than your spouse, that's adultery. It may also be incest, rape or any number of other crimes but at least it is adultery.
- ✚ Christ makes it clear in this passage that the thought is father to the action. God alone may judge the heart, but he will judge accurately. The key to controlling lust is to decide that you will have one partner as long as you both shall live. Lust is a sin.
- ✚ There is no path which gets you halfway to heaven. You either make heaven, or hell. The stakes are so high that it is wise and prudent to do what ever is necessary to achieve heaven. If that means sawing off parts of your body, so be it. We normally consider that an exaggeration for effect, but the point is deadly serious.
- ✚ God understands that the human being has a desire for sex. After all, he put it there. To satisfy that desire for sex he has given us marriage. Paul tells us that an unsatisfied desire for sex with your intended bride is a good reason to get married.

Do you remember the promise you made on your wedding day? It was something like, "to cling to her and her alone." That is God's intention for your marriage.

Divorce

It follows, naturally, that adultery would therefore be grounds for divorce. We may take a moment to examine the new view as propounded from our pulpit.

- ✚ Adultery is now defined as “anything that breaks sexual intimacy.” Besides the obvious, this includes things like pornography and erectile dysfunction. The concept is now quite a bit more elastic.
- ✚ Abandonment — based on the Pauline exception — is now considered grounds for divorce. This includes any activity which could be interpreted as spending too much time on something other than the marriage. The obvious difficulty is with the definition of “too much time.”

The new definition is much more flexible, of course. And it certainly accords more with what our society believes today. We might therefore take a look at the classic view and see where it differs.

- ✚ The original word in the Greek is the root word from which we get our word, “pornography.” The most common translation of this word in the Scriptures is adultery.
- ✚ The word can also be translated “fornication” or “incest.” In either these cases it is still sex outside of marriage.
- ✚ The Pauline exception we have noted has classically been interpreted to mean separation, not divorce. Also, the circumstances were strictly limited in the classical view. Spending too much time on your stamp collection is a problem, not grounds for divorce.

We might also invoke the context of the times. At the time which Christ was speaking, there were two views. One set of rabbis held that practically anything was grounds for divorce, including such things as burning the soup or raising your voice towards your husband. The other school of rabbis held that adultery, and adultery alone (the old-fashioned definition) constituted sufficient grounds. People then, like people today, preferred the much more liberal interpretation. Christ came down in favor of the other side. The reader has the privilege of selecting which view he thinks is most appropriate.

Vows

It might seem out of place to include Christ’s words on vows and oaths in this section, but there is very definitely a connection. Bill Clinton to the contrary notwithstanding, character is not something composed of separate little compartments. It’s something you carry with you all the time. In particular we have the issue of honesty: do you keep your word? A vow is a special form of keeping your word. It is clear from the Scripture that a man’s word, as my father said, should be his bond. You say it, you mean it, you carry it out. If that’s true for just your ordinary speech, how much more true should it be for something like your wedding vows?

Think of it this way: you went to the trouble of assembling a large number of your friends and family, probably in a church in the presence of a minister of God, for the specific purpose of hearing the two of you pledge each other that you would stay faithful to each other for the rest of your lives. You did it, as my impious brother-in-law puts it, “right out in front of God and everybody.” (He ought to know; he’s on wife number four or five.) Yet our society takes this ceremony so lightly that we encourage people — often at the wedding reception itself — to view marriage and fidelity as laughable. We are shocked when someone doesn’t commit adultery. Do you not see that adultery is simply a form of dishonesty? You gave the woman your word; keep it.

This may seem to be difficult. Honesty often is. It’s just that it is required.

Eye for an Eye

Matthew 5:38-42 NASB "You have heard that it was said, 'AN EYE FOR AN EYE, AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH.' (39) "But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. (40) "If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. (41) "Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. (42) "Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you.

Human Society: Us and Them

Something which often amazes Americans is the fact — and it is an undoubted fact — that most of the people of the world think they are racially superior to the rest of the planet. The Japanese know that they are better than the Chinese; Koreans are better than the Japanese and Chinese better than both. And none of them consider this exceptional. Indeed, within societies we usually find a class structure. The upper class takes it for granted that they are entitled to rule because they are obviously so much superior to those in the lower classes. Human beings naturally divide the world into us and them; and we all know that “we” are better than they are.

Only America — the melting pot of every people in the world — has had to confront the thought that there might not be one group of people who are racially superior to the rest. Worse yet, we’ve had to confront the thought that those people in the other group might have something to say that worth hearing. This is not particularly a virtue for Americans; we’ve been more or less forced into it. But perhaps we have the perspective to see it as it is. This is particularly relevant when it comes to the concept of a feud.

The Feud

For most of us, our memories extend only to the last insult we received. This is very helpful in conducting a feud. We certainly don’t want justice — when vengeance is available. This desire for vengeance is one of the main reasons we have a system of laws to provide justice. Otherwise, we would have an overabundance of feuds. The chief characteristic of a feud is that it seems to go on forever.

Why? Because breaking a feud requires sacrifice. Somebody has to forgo vengeance for the last insult to break the chain of insult and vengeance. That is what Christ is talking about here. It is obvious that you are going to encounter the evil person, the abusive person. You are going to have grounds to conduct a feud. It will go on indefinitely unless someone takes positive steps to break it. What Christ is telling you here is the recipe for preventing it from getting started in the first place. Anger is a sin; so is envy. Christ is telling you to prevent both. There are three weapons that he brings to your attention here:

- ✚ The first is patient endurance. If you will recall, we have stated all along that the Christian life is that of a pilgrim, just passing through this world. The attitude is important because it changes the way you respond to the evil around you. If you know that you only have a short time to put up with this problem, it makes it a lot easier. Many of us approach life like were going to live here forever. We’re not.

- ✚ The second weapon is simple charity. If someone is sufficiently in need as to ask you for help, you should do so if you can. It turns acquaintances into friends; sometimes, it turns enemies into friends. That applies even to those were enemies that we did not know we had.
- ✚ The third weapon is often underrated. We might be willing enough to be charitable to someone who is forced to beg us; it amplifies our pride and increases his humiliation. But if someone borrows from you, with the honest intent of repaying, it preserves a certain dignity. This prevents them from getting mad at someone they're not allowed to get mad at. Remember, the thought is still father to the action.

In Marriage

This advice applies in marriage as well as in the rest of the world. If you've ever had your spouse get mad at you, you understand that this passage means something to married couples. The world will tell you "don't be an enabler." Often, however, that means that you are being counseled to act not in love but in self-interest. The idea is that the first sign of trouble you should react vigorously create as much of a stink as you possibly can, and thus enforce your will on your partner. Get help when you need it; not just evidence for your lawyer.

But is that love? Love bears all things. Love believes all things. Love hopes all things. Love endures all things. The world believes in the love that does not; Christians know the love that does.

What's the problem here? I suggest to you that it is the world's view of marriage. We are told, over and over again, that we need to have a balance of power in our marriage. In the second paragraph we are told that we need to know how to tip that balance of power in our favor. Much of radical feminist literature concerns itself with that balance of power. For the Christian, the concept does not apply in marriage. We don't have a balance of power in marriage; we have an outpouring of love.

Enemies List

Matthew 5:43-48 NASB "You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.' (44) "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, (45) so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (46) "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? (47) "If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? (48) "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Who Is My Neighbor Enemy?

Christ now ends this section with what seems to be an impossible command: be perfect. To understand how we can do this we must begin with the concept of just who is our enemy. I submit that there are three general categories:

- ✚ First, there are those who persecute us.
- ✚ Second there are those who are just generally evil. We seem to have an abundance of them, and if we come into contact with them our righteousness will cause conflict – and they will become our enemies.

✚ But perhaps the most numerous class of enemies is this: whoever we make our enemies. Sometimes it seems we go out of our way to produce them.

One thing is certain: we don't seem to have any shortage of them. The question seems to be what were going to do about it.

What to Do

We must begin with a little advice on what not to do. We are to forgo the physical reaction to those who are our enemies. In fact we are to have the exact opposite reaction the world is expecting. At the very least, this carries with it the advantage of surprise. Nobody is expecting you to do this.

As a bit of personal testimony, let me assure you that this works. I once had a manager who was absolutely "a great example of a bad idea." He made it his purpose that all of his employees understood that they were not supposed to be enjoying themselves at all when they were at work. He was a man who "did all the thinking around here, because I personally have all the brains." I was very frustrated. My wife suggested, however, that I should make a deliberate effort to make this man my friend. It took quite a while to do it, but it succeeded. Throughout the entire process the man did not have a clue as to how to handle me. He was accustomed to using the weapons of Satan; he had no way to withstand the weapons of God.

It's more than that. Not only are we to forgo the physical things of this world in dealing with our enemies, not only are we to love our enemies, but we are also commanded to pray for them. Let's put this into perspective. We, those chosen few who are mighty enough to know the Almighty God, have been asked to bring forward to him those poor souls who have the misfortune to be our enemies. We are to put them before the throne of grace so that our heavenly Father may bless them — and likely enough get to know him better.

The problem with most of this for most of us is that it seems to be unjust. But is it? We are taught to love our neighbor as ourselves; have you ever asked how you love yourself? I don't know about you, but I have no trouble loving myself despite all the things I've done. It doesn't matter how ashamed I am of some of the stuff that I've pulled, I still think I'm the most lovable guy around and definitely worth loving. Instead of whacking me over the head for this, God simply asks me to be fair about it. He simply asks that I treat everybody else the same way. That's fair, isn't it? So you see, it really is a just thing to do.

I Can't Do This

The immediate reaction from the Christian is, "I can't do this." But if you ever asked yourself just what "this" is? You are to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. In other words, you are to do what a question is always supposed to do: be the imitation of Christ. It's not that you can't do this; it's that you can't do this by yourself successfully. But as Hudson Taylor once put it, God's work, done in God's way, will never lack for God's supply. He will enable you to do this if you will but ask.

If you are a parent, you understand this. If your child comes up to you and asks you for something that you know is good for them, something that you know will help them grow into be the

kind of adult you want to be, you will do whatever is necessary to get it for them. Your heavenly Father is no less wise. If you ask for something that helps you grow like him, he will provide.

Marriage

It may sound like this section doesn't have much to say about marriage, but I cannot leave this lesson without bringing the point home. If this is what you would do for your enemies, then how much more should you behave well towards those you love? Your wife is your sister in Christ; at least treat her that well. Sadly, it is often true that when we make an enemy we do it in our own household. Take care that you do not make your spouse your enemy. And if you do, take care to treat them as Christ commands us here.

Stealth Christianity - Matthew 6:1-18

The Hidden Life

One of the great difficulties in practicing a mature Christian life deals with the question of ostentation. We are taught his children that we belong in church every week; that people should see our light shining before them as Christians and that in general the major difficulty we face is to make our private life and public life the same, one of Christian charity. As we mature, however, there arises the difficulty of pride. The temptation is to take pride in our public Christianity, thinking to ourselves that everyone knows what a great question we are. Christ corrects that in today's passages.

In Giving

Matthew 6:1-4 NASB "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. (2) "So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. (3) "But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, (4) so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

Perhaps easiest to see how this might become a problem if we start with a simple fact: almsgiving is the direct opposite of the sin of gluttony. When you give to the poor you in some way deprive yourself of some material blessing. You might, for example, give up the privilege of eating an expensive meal at a restaurant in order that you might give the price of that meal so that someone else could eat. Almsgiving defeats gluttony. But Satan is not without recourse. If he cannot trap me with gluttony, there is always pride. It is the temptation known to the ancients as "vainglory." This is not a temptation which is exclusive to the rich. If you time it right, you can get a lot of credit for being the first to throw an envelope into the offering plate. Even the widow's mite can be an occasion of pride — if you stage it right.

Credit where credit is due: Jesus is not talking about the typical, ordinary Jew of the time. This in particular is probably aimed at the Pharisees. In the Middle Ages the Jewish Sage Maimonides put forth his 8 degrees of charity (in ascending order):

He who gives grudgingly, reluctantly, or with regret.

He who gives less than he should, but gives graciously.

He who gives what he should, but only after he is asked.

He who gives before he is asked.

He who gives without knowing to whom he gives, although the recipient knows the identity of the donor.

He who gives without making his identity known.

He who gives without knowing to whom he gives, neither does the recipient know from whom he receives.

He who helps a fellowman to support himself by a gift, or a loan, or by finding employment for him, thus helping him to become self-supporting.

You can see that through the first seven degrees that we are increasingly blessed by being increasingly anonymous.

In Prayer

Matthew 6:5-8 NASB "When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. (6) "But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. (7) "And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. (8) "So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

In these words Christ commands to you the virtue of prayer in secret. There are number practical reasons why you would want to do this anyway:

- ✚ First, there is the advantage of having no interruptions. My children seem to have an absolutely radar like instinct for knowing when I am at prayer — and interrupting me as frequently as possible. One must persist.
- ✚ Prayer in private has the virtue of allowing you to listen as well as talk. Listening is often what's missing our praying.
- ✚ Sometimes there are things that you can reveal only to God, and no one else. If you pray only with other people around, you can't do this.

Christ points out two particular evils here. The first of them we have dealt with in charity, namely, ostentation. It's a curious thing; but often enough the Christian has the great desire to appear to be pious. No doubt some of us must appear to be pious, so that we might set an example for others. But the temptation of pride is there.

Perhaps more to the point in prayer is the problem of repetition. You might not think that's a problem in our church; in my particular church, prayers are hip, cool and "with it." Repetition is not allowed. What is allowed — and might just be a bit disturbing — is a repetition by form, as opposed to content. The most common form of repetition, however, in our lives today is that which comes over the Internet. You've seen them; repeat this prayer exactly as it is worded, seven times, and then pass it on to 5280 of your closest friends. If you break the chain you will be struck by a meteorite at dawn the next morning. (Incoming! Meteorite!)

Chrysostom gave us his words of warning this way:

You do not then pray in order to teach God your wants, but to move Him, that you may become His friend by the importunity of your applications to Him, that you may be humbled, that you may be reminded of your sins.

We need to remember just where our prayers are headed.

In Fasting

This passage is a little out of sequence, but it fits the theme.

Matthew 6:16-18 NASB "Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. (17) "But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face (18) so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

The Christian of today is not accustomed to fasting, at least in evangelical churches. Well, that's not exactly true; we call it dieting. It is not a spiritual exercise. So why would anybody give up food (or any other physical pleasure) for a period of time and think this was spiritual? One good reason is this: if you're not paying attention to what you're eating, you have the time and energy to pay attention to what you're thinking. Have you ever gotten into a routine where everything seems to go exactly the same way all day long, every day? Up in the morning, make the coffee, clean the kitchen, back in the living room, and so on — that's how it goes. But suppose you give up one of those meals; what can you gain?

The most obvious answer is that you gain the time necessary to focus yourself on spiritual things. We are so busy today with ordinary business; skipping a meal precepts of time. It might also free up some money, if the meal you had in mind was it an expensive restaurant. Both may be given to the kingdom of God. But it's more than that; it is a preparation of the human being for service.

If you're missing a meal, most of us would complain about it. We are not particularly prone to the temptation to glorify ourselves by virtue of being someone who fasts, because most evangelical Christians don't do it at all. You're liable to be seen not so much pious as weird. This, of course, is yet another reason for you to hide the fact that you're fasting.

May I suggest, however, that we look at this business of hidden Christianity as a whole? The problem here is this: if you are a real Christian, you are going to do works of charity and service which will come quite naturally to you. You will care for those around you and it will show. How do you avoid the reaction of the world that says, "He just does that for show"? The answer is relatively simple. If you want to hide a book, you put it in a library. If you want to hide a leaf, you put it in a forest. If you want to hide a man, you put him in a city. And if you want to hide the light that shines before men, you put it in a lighthouse. Let the lower lights be burning.

Prayer Toward God

We now begin the study of what is commonly known as the Lord's Prayer. It is convenient to break it into two sections, the first being those prayers we address to God concerning God.

Matthew 6:9-10 NASB "Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. (10) 'Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven.

Our Father

Permit me to introduce you to the foundation of Christian thought and Western civilization: the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. When Christ taught the world to pray to “Our Father” he culminated all of Jewish thought. He alone could do this, because he alone would provide the sacrifice that would break down the wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile. At the very same time this phrase provides us with the basis of the church; as witness Chrysostom:

For what hurt does such kindred with those beneath us, when we are all alike kin to One above us? For who calls God Father, in that one title confesses at once the forgiveness of sins, the adoption, the heirship, the brotherhood, which he has with the Only-begotten, and the gift of the Spirit. For none can call God Father, but he who has obtained all these blessings. In a two-fold manner, therefore, he moves the feeling of them that pray, both by the dignity of Him who is prayed to, and the greatness of those benefits which we gain by prayer.

It is fitting that such a prayer be made in great dignity: “hallowed be your name.” We pray in that name, we baptize in that name, we bury in that name and we will rise again in that name. It is therefore fitting that we keep that name sacred within us; not as a casual obscenity. The point is capable of great elaboration, but the name is not sacred within us why would anyone else hold it sacred?

Kingdom Come

There is a high degree of audacity and faith required to make this prayer. You are asking that the creator of the universe have his will done, first by you. Who are you to ask for the privilege of participating in that? My answer is simply this: it is appropriate for us to pray this, for we are the children of the great King. But it is also dangerous; for if you ask that God’s will be done, you are kindling within your self the desire to do that which is right. The world will not let that go unpunished.

By the same token we cannot pray anything else. We are the servants of the great King of the universe, the creator of all things. If we are loyal servants — and we should be — then what else could we want? What else could possibly be appropriate? By asking this thing we are uniting our will with his will and imploring his great power to get it done. Do you not see that we are asking not so much that God will do what he pleases, but that we will be pleased with what God does?

Thy Will Be Done

Let me ask you something: do you believe that your life has a God given purpose? Or do you believe that you are put on this planet simply to meander about, doing whatever good you can but that there is no particular reason why you ever had to exist, nor is there any reason that if you should exist you should continue to do so? Modern society is based on the idea that you are a random product of evolution, with no purpose whatsoever. The Christian acknowledges in this simple phrase that this is false. But God does indeed have a plan for you; his will is apparent to each and every Christian. What might not be apparent to you about this particular passage is that he has a will for everyone else too. When you pray this prayer, you are asking God to make sure that happens for them as well. This, of course, starts with evangelism. Did you think the Lord’s Prayer as motive for evangelism?

This is also an acknowledgment that you know who is in control of your life — despite all the troubles you find. Troubles, which you might just as well have deserved, but God himself has relieved them. Thomas a Kempis put it this way:

But here, in the midst of these troubles, what shall I say? Your will be done, Lord. I have richly deserved to be troubled and distressed. But I must bear it. Would that I could do so patiently, until the storm passes and calm returns! Yet Your almighty hand can take this temptation from me, or lighten its attack so that I do not altogether sink beneath it, as You, my God, my Mercy, have very often done for me before. And the more difficult my plight, the easier for You is this change of the right hand of the Most High.

By saying this we surrender ourselves to the trials and troubles which God has ordained for our lives. It is our submission to his tribulation which allows him to make us perfect for the purpose that he has chosen for our lives.

Prayer for Ourselves

Matthew 6:11-15 NASB 'Give us this day our daily bread. (12) 'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. (13) 'And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. [For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.]' (14) "For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. (15) "But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

Our Daily Bread

We might begin by pointing out the obvious. We pray for “our” daily bread — meaning that we pray not only for whatever stuffs our own particular face, but that which feeds our fellow Christians (at the least). We are explicitly commanded not only to share that which we have, but that we are to ask God to provide for others as well. It is worth noting that when we make such a prayer it is extremely difficult for us to withhold food from our brothers while asking for our daily bread.

Note, please, that it is our *daily* bread. My security is in God, not in my 401(k) account. That’s a difficult point for most Christians, because we’ve been taught to save frugally, invest wisely, and of course to be hag-ridden worried about the future. Surprisingly, this is a characteristic of Christians tend to have a lot more money than others. Your author has had the privilege of serving in two different churches. One of those churches was composed of people who were relatively poor. Being laid off from the job was a relatively common occurrence; the job itself didn’t pay very much. They were obliged, therefore, to put their trust in the Lord, and they did. The result was a growing and glowing faith.

My current church is composed of some of the richest Christians in America, at least by the world’s standards. Wealth, and what to do with it, quite naturally are much more common sermon topics. But I note that the existence of this wealth, and the constant concern to keep and increase, tend to sap the faith of individual Christians. Indeed, it is very noticeable that certain Christians who have risen from poverty to wealth maintain a faith much greater than those who have always been accustomed to having plenty. I leave to the reader the analysis of why this might be, contenting myself merely to state the facts.

Finally, note that he references bread, not cake. Some of us would be very content if he had happened to mention jelly donuts. But the plain truth is that we are to pray for that which is necessary, not necessarily that which is fattening. Indeed, this is the only material items mentioned in the Lord's Prayer, from which you can gather that he does not consider our material success to be all that important. Your father knows what you need and will see that you get it. Beyond that, how fat does your wallet have to be?

Forgive Us Our Debts

Those of us who speak nothing but English might not be familiar with what other languages have in the way of tenses for verbs. I am told that learning Latin is a very frustrating experience because of all the verb tenses, their meaning and their endings. One thing we do miss, however, is the subtlety that comes from this. Our forgiving other people's debts to us is something which is expressed in what is called the "continuous present tense." My French teacher in high school explained it this way: when you say that you do something, you could mean that you do it once in a while, as an isolated action. Or you could be that you are continuously doing it. So for example, if you say "I go to the movies" you mean that you make it a point of taking that specific action once in a while. But if you say "I breathe" you mean that you do it all the time. The phrase "as we forgive" is in that continuous present tense; it means that we do it all the time. Which brings us to the difficulty of constant, continuous forgiveness: just exactly how do we do that?

Well, one good way to look at it is to ask how you forgive yourself. The truth is that most of us carry around two different yardsticks for forgiveness. There's one we use for others, which is a very honest, strict yardstick. Then there is a rubber yardstick we have for ourselves. This is dishonest. Pick which one you like, and use it for everybody. My own experience suggests that you pick the rubber yardstick; I find it much easier to apply the rubber yardstick to others than I did to apply the strict yardstick to myself.

Indeed, there is no sense of being forgiven in anything Christ says without the precondition of forgiving others. Christ makes it abundantly clear that his forgiveness is contingent upon our forgiving others. Why should this be so? Let's go back to the opening words: "Our Father." We are a family; the head of that family is rightly concerned for the unity of that family. Anyone who answers to the word "dad" understands the problem. The little darlings are going to have to forgive each other, or family life becomes impossible. God has the same problem with us. He has adopted the same solution.

Lead Us Not into Temptation

May we begin by noting that it is "us"? We are to pray that not only personally, but as a church; we are to be kept from temptation. Perhaps you hadn't thought of that. But may I suggest that you begin to pray for the leadership of your church, that they be not led into temptation? Let me give you a simple example. As every preacher knows, one way to be very popular as a preacher is to water down the gospel until it sounds like something for which heads will always nod North and South. There is a continuing temptation for the preacher to water down the gospel until it is palatable and acceptable to practically everyone. Doing this eliminates the requirement that a person repents and confesses prior to baptism. The usual substitution is to acknowledge that you have troubles in your life and that you need

God to help you out of them — which is not the same as repentance and confession. Similar difficulties come in dealing with the criminally rich. These temptations are not presented in black and white but in subtle shades of gray.

This statement is an acknowledgment that neither we individually nor we collectively are strong enough to stand up to the temptations that Satan can present. It is therefore a statement which acknowledges that fact and is contrary to our pride. For a great temptation indeed is given to every mature Christian in the thought that he can withstand the temptation of Satan by his own strength. Guess what: that's wrong. But it is also a statement that God can give us the strength to withstand that temptation. We are not strong enough — but He is. We are acknowledging that fact when we say this.

We may close with this: we are also acknowledging the fact that Satan and temptation are real. I understand that acknowledging the reality of Satan is not fashionable in the church today. We don't believe in that guy with the pitchfork and red tail. I don't either. But I do believe that the Scripture is honest and accurate in describing the enemy of our souls as being both a spiritual creation who exists, and who is also powerful. Only by the power of God, as given to us at the cross, can we resist him. But before we do that we have to acknowledge that Satan exists and is our opponent. The wording in this passage can be translated "deliver us from the evil One." Acknowledging our weakness before temptation also acknowledges the strength of our opponent — and his reality.

Consider the Lilies - Matthew 6:19-34

Treasure in Heaven

Matthew 6:19-21 NASB "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. (20) "But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; (21) for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

What Does That Mean?

Sometimes it helps to be literal minded. Just how does one store up treasure in heaven? After all, it's not like you can send it by FedEx. So just what is one supposed to do? I suggest there are two well-established methods:

✚ The first has to do with common charity. I would point out that, contrary to some current teaching, the most common form of common charity is personal. That means you give a non-deductible, not tax-free gift to someone in need. The gift itself might not be money; it might be getting someone a job, for instance. Whatever it is, it's you sacrificing for someone else. This also includes the less common form of common charity, which is giving to some organization which provides charitable services to others. The author's home church, for example, spends 15% of its income on missions in other parts of the world. Like many such missions, these missions are a combination of evangelism and practical assistance.

✚ The second method is quite simple: tithe. This gets one of two interesting reactions. Those who do not tithe often can tell you, mathematically, just why it's impossible for them to do it. This, in the richest country in the world. Those who do tithe have quite different reaction. They usually shuffle their feet, look down, and then tell you something like, "well, the Lord has blessed us so much..." My usual statement is this: if you want God to bless you, tithe. Then you can buy your calculator.

It's a matter of getting your financial priorities straight. Even if you're one of those sophisticated investors who has a financial planner to assist in the process, the planner will tell you first things first — know what your objectives are; know what your priorities are. For the Christian, the first priority is God; the first objective is laying up treasure in heaven. The rest is mathematics.

If Not Money, What?

This strikes many people as absurd. After all, they ask, what's more important than making money? We can give you a few answers to that.

Solomon put it this way:

Proverbs 16:16 NASB How much better it is to get wisdom than gold! And to get understanding is to be chosen above silver.

Let me put it another way. A rich fool is just that — a fool. If you need an example, let me give you two words: trophy wife.

You have to have a positive way to approach this; a life composed entirely of "thou shalt not" just doesn't work. As I said, you need to get your objectives and your priorities straight. The Scripture puts it this way:

1 Timothy 6:17 NASB Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy.

Put your hope in God; it works. To do this you are going to need to learn to accept the poverty you have. This is almost ridiculous in America, a land where even the beggars are rich. But for the Christian it is part of the experience needed to mature. The apostle James put it this way:

James 2:5 NASB Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?

It does seem that riches may indeed be a barrier to the rich faith that God wants you to have. Think it through; are the blessings of God only for the rich? No; God is no "respector of persons." Is it not logical therefore that the blessings he chooses to give us are those which are unrelated to money? I have served in a rich church and in a poor church; I regret to tell you that the rich church is really the poor one.

Why Is This so Hard?

Americans in particular seem to find this most difficult. The abundance of money in America creates problems for the Christian. I would point out three reasons why most Americans have such difficulty accepting the idea that their treasure should be in heaven:

- ✚ First is the desire for security. When there is a lot of money around, it seems that security can be attained by having a lot of money. If your society is dirt poor, the possibility doesn't exist. In America, it appears all around us. But if you please, look at the fine print on your brokerage statement. It will tell you that all investments are a risk; things could go wrong and you could go broke. There is no real security in money. If you have money, use it wisely — build up treasure in heaven.
- ✚ Perhaps more important is the sin of envy. We don't want to build up treasure in heaven because we're so busy using it on earth to keep up with our next-door neighbors. If my neighbor gets a bigger boat, I must have a bigger boat. Think about this: suppose you didn't buy the boat at all. Suppose you decide to sacrifice the money you had set aside for the boat for the sake of those more in need than yourself. It's a change in attitude, but it is laying up treasure in heaven.
- ✚ In my opinion the biggest problem of all is pride. It comes in two forms. The least common form is that of saving face; we want to appear respectable. We have to keep up appearances. The more common form is the ostentatious pride of someone who has to tell you just how wonderful he is, as evidenced by his wealth. The horrible thing about that last option is that such a person can be proud of his wealth — and proud of his giving. Do not let your right arm know what your left arm is doing!

Lamp of the Body

Matthew 6:22-24 NASB "The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. (23) "But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! (24) "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Definitions

Before we go too much further, we need to do a little explanation of the Scripture as the original hearers would've understood it.

- ✚ The word “eye” is a common metaphor for the desires of the human heart. We often say something like, “he’s got an eye for...” or “keep an eye on her.” This goes along with the ancient Greek conception that sight was something that happened because the eye generated some sort of ray which did the seeing. So what Christ is talking about here is keeping your desires clean.
- ✚ The word used in this translation, “clear”, is also translated “simple.” The original meaning is something that was applied to cloth. If a piece of cloth was laid out unfolded it was said to be clear. In other words, you could see all of the cloth, not just the part the merchant wanted on display. The generalization of this was anything that was in right order. Applied to the eye, this would mean that you had clear vision.¹²
- ✚ The word “Mammon” is taken from the Chaldean language. For the ancient Hebrew it had to uses: it could mean simply money, or it could also mean one of the Greek gods who was worshiped as the God of wealth. So there is a touch of the idea of idolatry about this word. It brings to our mind that it is possible to worship money.
- ✚ We should not need to define the word “other.” However, the word used in verse 24 in the original Greek implies an opposite. So it’s not something like “red or blue.” You’re not picking from two similar items, but making a choice between two opposite items.

Single-Minded Devotion — Why Not?

So why do we find this so difficult? Why is this something we don’t choose once and leave it set?

There are a number of reasons:

- ✚ For some of us the art of flip-flopping seems to come naturally. We have to have the latest fashion, the latest fad. Often enough we are influenced by others around us so much that we can’t really make up our own minds; we have to borrow theirs.
- ✚ More commonly, some of us are socially acceptable hypocrites. We want the best of this world and of God; and we want to be able to pick and choose. It’s not hard to figure out which choices are socially acceptable, even though hypocritical. Pursuing the almighty dollar is one of these.

Single-minded devotion is not an emotion, despite the emergent church to the contrary. It is an act of the will; it is a decision. As such it has two primary characteristics:

- ✚ It begins with a decision made any rational, calm manner. If you make this decision in an emotional high, you will quickly repent of it. You will save yourself, “well, I was feeling really enthusiastic.” Make this decision when your head is level and your feet are on the ground.
- ✚ It continues by reaffirming this decision on a daily basis. Like any habit, it must be practiced. There is a reason that people (including this author) write daily devotionals.

How to Do It

So, how does one go about doing this? I would make two suggestions:

- ✚ First, such your mind on things above. Deliberately decide to focus on the things of God, not on the things of this world. It’s a decision; make it. Don’t let it happen by accident.
- ✚ Then decide to enjoy what God has given you. That too is a decision. For example, I have decided to enjoy the wife of my youth rather than chase down a trophy wife (because I already have one.)

¹² The author of these lessons wears an eye patch over his right eye. This point about having clear vision is therefore quite dear to his heart — and his left eye.

Providence

Matthew 6:25-34 NASB "For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? (26) "Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? (27) "And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life? (28) "And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, (29) yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. (30) "But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith! (31) "Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?' (32) "For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. (33) "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. (34) "So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

The Concept of Providence

Of course, the obvious question is this: if I put my trust in God, what is he going to do in my life? The normal answer is that of Providence. Simply put, Christ is the sustainer of the universe. The reason the laws of physics work today the same way they did yesterday is because God so wills it. He sustains his creation. That sustenance also includes you. He tells you that he will provide, which is, of course, Providence. It generally comes in one of three flavors:

- ✚ Direct Providence. An example of this would be Elijah being fed by the ravens in the wilderness. It means simply that God is intervening in your affairs, letting you know exactly what is going to do, but not doing so in terms of an obvious miracle. This is rather rare.
- ✚ Instant Providence. This is the kind of Providence you hear stories about. God, it seems, has a penchant for providing for his children in exactly the right amount the right time. It's not miraculous, but it's one heck of a coincidence. This is the kind of thing that strengthens your faith, but it's still pretty rare.
- ✚ Overriding Providence. This is the normal kind of Providence. Things just seem to work out; you just have to hang in there long enough. Remember Jacob in prison? It took a while to get him out, but God had not neglected him. The reason this is the normal kind of Providence is that it both provides for you and trains you for the future; God is kind of economical that way.

God Can — but Will He?

Most Christians have no problem accepting the idea that God is powerful enough to do whatever he pleases, including provide for them. We're thrilled to hear stories of missionaries who receive checks for the exact right amount of money exactly on time. The question however for most of us is, will he do that for us?

That's what Christ is answering, by example, in this passage. He points out to us some of the common objects around us which clearly benefit from God's care. As Christ sustains the universe, he sustains the birds of the air. If he didn't, they would soon go extinct. Now he does that for the birds, how much better will he treat you? That's essentially the argument is going on here; you, the child of God, are much more important to him than birds or grass. So he will take much better care for you; it's

part of his character. That point is quite important; when you pray it's usually a good idea to appeal to God's character rather than your own merits. After all, his character doesn't change. Your merits do.

But there is a condition to this: you must be a faithful Christian. That means – as pointed out in this chapter – that you have one master, God. This is known as being a “real Christian” – as opposed to the kind that shows up on Sunday morning, sings and listens, and goes out unaffected for the rest of the week. Do you think the coach can't tell a lack of sincerity? How much more God? If the only reason you're on the football team is to attract the girls, you're going to sit on the bench a lot.

Seek First

If you are to seek first the kingdom of God, it helps to have a little advice on the steps to take. I submit there are three things that every Christian can do:

- ✚ First, seek to understand the kingdom of God. If you are uneducated in the Scriptures, remedy this as soon as possible. Know what it is you are seeking.
- ✚ Next, seek to participate in the kingdom of God. There is a reason God gave us the church.
- ✚ Finally, seek to serve others in the kingdom of God. Your Lord did not come to be served, but to be a servant.

In the course of this you must also seek righteousness, for God is righteous. That means that you must seek it for yourself, to always be a righteous person. That means you must seek it for others; let your eyes be open to see injustice and correct it where you can.

Other than that, don't worry. As the motto of the Royal Navy used to be, “Fear God, Dread Naught.” In particular, remember that you can do nothing about yesterday, for yesterday is history and history belongs to God. Nor can you really do anything about tomorrow; you really only have the present. Focus your thought and effort, therefore, on using the present wisely. Consider the lilies of the field.

Art of Judgment - Matthew 7:1-6

It is convenient to divide this lesson into three major areas:

- ✚ Judgment as it relates to those outside the church.
- ✚ Judgment as it relates to those inside the church.
- ✚ An example of judgment by Christ.

Matthew 7:1-6 NIV "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. (2) For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. (3) "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? (4) How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? (5) You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. (6) "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.

Judgment — Outside

The question of judging those outside the church is often wrapped up in politics. In the time of Christ the follower of God had very little to say about how the government (formal or informal) handled the ordinary questions of morality. That's not true in a democracy. Despite the claim that "you can't legislate morality" we in fact do legislate morality frequently. We consider bank robbery immoral; we pass laws against it. So at the very least citizens of a democracy pass moral judgment at the ballot box whenever the issue arises. This does not seem to bother the world at large; after all, everybody gets a vote. When we think of judging people outside the church we usually mean person-to-person.

Entitled

The question often comes up as to how a Christian should respond to someone outside the church "living in sin." We may take the argument from the structure of the Sermon on the Mount directly:

- ✚ You don't need much observation of society to know that those who are blessed (at least materially) tend to set the standards of judgment. We, as Christians, are blessed. That's what the Beatitudes were all about. So in a moral sense, we are the ones of whom God has approved. We are in the usual position to pass judgment.
- ✚ We are, by the grace of God, also considered to be righteous. This can be taken in one of two ways. First, we are righteous by the blood of Christ. Second, we are righteous because we attempt to live righteous lives. The definition of righteousness has certainly changed in our lifetimes, but the principle that the righteous are the ones who should judge remains with us. We want our judges to have clean hands.

So it often appears that we are the ones who should be passing judgment on people outside the church. Most Christians will condemn this, as long as the people outside the church are individuals. We don't want the confrontation, and we been warned too often about judgment to attempt to criticize Sally or Bill. But there is one group of people outside the church that were really good at criticizing: "them." This group comes with no names, is represented by nobody, and is usually condemned and judged at gatherings where everyone agrees that "they" are the ones who are doing it wrong. The

difficulty with this kind of judgment is that it generates a reputation of blue nosed snobbery while effectively changing nothing.

Remember, the normal condition of Christianity is that we are a minority. The morals of the rest of the world are something which we observe. It is a rare instance in which Christians are so predominant that they can be said to set moral standards. Our current set of standards would hardly serve as a sterling example.

So what's the right answer?

1 Corinthians 4:5 NIV Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.

Pearls before Swine

You always wondered what that business about pearls before swine was about - didn't you? If you take it in context it's pretty obvious. Let me give you an example.

Suppose you go up to one of "them" and began to lecture this person on their sexual morality, choice of clothing, style of speech and anything else that seems to matter to you. You do this extensively quoting the Scriptures to the person. A little experience with this process will quickly convince you that your listener has no use for your Scripture quotation abilities. In fact, you're going to get quite a rejection. That's why you don't do it.

It might occur to you, however, the Christ did precisely that. But remember that he did it only to the Pharisees. Shock tactics are used where shock tactics apply. It appears, therefore, that we must be selective about designating swine. Those outside the church need the conviction of sin, and that is the function of the Holy Spirit. Once that begins, then the Christian has an opening. Until the Spirit begins his work, we have nothing to work with. As Paul put it,

1 Corinthians 2:14 NIV The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

The Power of Example

Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way: "love is the radical condemnation of sin." If you want to see spiritual discernment in that person outside the church, you must set an example of the two major characteristics of God: love — and righteousness. You need to be an example of love so that those who see you know that they will not face condemnation, but help. You need to be an example of righteousness so that they will see the flaws in their own lives.

It's like Christ told you: let your light shine before men. If you are a serious Christian, truly repentant and truly loving, you will live a life that makes its impact felt outside the church.

Indeed, judgment of those outside the church is explicitly forbidden to us:

1 Corinthians 5:9-13 NIV (9) I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— (10) not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. (11) But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. (12) What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? (13) God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you."

So we see that we are not to judge those outside the church — but with those inside the church, it's a different story.

Judgment within the Church

It should be apparent, however, that we have some obligation of judgment of our fellow Christians. The key criterion is to make sure we are doing it for their benefit, not for the satisfaction of our egos.

The Obligation to Judge

So, just how are we to do this judging of those inside the church?

First, whatever else we do we should not be a stumbling block to our fellow Christian. Paul put it this way:

Romans 14:13-15 NIV Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. (14) As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. (15) If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.

If you read the entire fourteenth chapter of Romans, you will see that the obligation is that we should not use our freedom to ruin another Christian's conscience. This cuts both ways. The person who has an extra set of regulations should not impose them upon the person who does not — a commonly violated injunction. (See Temperance Movement.) Likewise, the person without the regulations should not undercut the other person's conscience. So, if you will, the first rule of judgment within the church is to exercise a great deal of "shut up."

There are certainly instances, however, where our fellow Christian has fallen into sin and it is the duty of his fellow Christians to restore him to righteousness. There are two criteria for doing this:

- ✚ Galatians 6:1 NIV Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.
- ✚ James 2:12-14 NIV Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, (13) because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment! (14) What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?

The first verse is relatively straightforward. You find your Christian brother in sin; do what is necessary to restore him. But there are two cautions: you should do this gently, and you should also do

it with a sense of self awareness that you might be subject to the same sin. If you want to see the difficulty clearly, think of it this way: the testimony of an alcoholic towards another alcoholic is most powerful. But the danger to the first alcoholic is the greatest.

The whole of such restoration must be clothed in mercy. The idea is pretty simple; you received mercy, you pass it along. You should note that in this context verse fourteen is seldom included in this message. I put it in there because so many of us are so good at being merciful — in theory. The practical act of mercy is required.

Pitfalls

May I point out some common pitfalls in the process of attempting to restore the sinner to grace inside the church?

- ✚ One common error is that we point out the sins of others not so much so that they may be restored, but so that we may feel justified in our own sins. This is a delicate form of hypocrisy, but it is hypocrisy nonetheless.
- ✚ Sometimes we condemn the sinner by giving up on the sinner. We say something like, “Joe is just beyond recovery. There’s nothing that can be done about an alcoholic like that.” What are really saying here is that we know God isn’t powerful enough to deal with Joe — which is either blasphemy or stupidity, you pick.
- ✚ The most common pitfall is that of the rubber yardstick. The yardstick we use for measuring our moral conduct is light and easy, but we hold others to much stricter standard. It’s like measuring with the rubber yardstick; you get whatever answer you want. Whatever that might be, it’s not measurement.

How to Do It

May I give you a few adages which have seen great usefulness in the past?

- ✚ Your grandmother told you too, “hate the sin but love the sinner.” This may seem very difficult to do, but as it turns out you have an excellent example of how to do it very close by. The example is you. Think how you love yourself, despite the things you have done. God is simply asking you to be fair about this; apply the same standard to everyone else. You find that hating the sin and loving the sinner turns out to be something you can do every day.
- ✚ Remember that judgment comes from your own understanding — but correction comes from what God reveals. Don’t judge someone inside the church by what you think they must be doing; that your own understanding. Wait until God reveals the difficulty — it may be different than what you think it is.
- ✚ You should condemn sin so much that you reject sinful methods of condemnation. Being judgmental rather than corrective is to be sinful; it’s wrong.

In all these things remember the steps of church discipline. Go to the person individually first. If you can straighten things out by doing it, fine — and no one else needs to know about it. God knows what the records look like, so who else needs to? If that doesn’t work, take two or three others with you and gently encourage that sinner to repent. This establishes the facts in the presence of more than one witness, and it also helps to get rid of any personal animosity. Finally, if that doesn’t work it may be necessary to take it to the entire church. Always remember that the objective is not to punish or eject

the sinner, but to correct the sinner. The Day of Judgment will come; evil will be condemned and good rewarded. In the meanwhile we must do what we can to help each other.

Learn by Example

Let's see how Christ did it:

John 8:2-11 NIV At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. (3) The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group (4) and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. (5) In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" (6) They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. (7) When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." (8) Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. (9) At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. (10) Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" (11) "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."]

The Trap

It should not be necessary to point this out, but there are two facts which are accepted by everyone present. The first is that adultery is a sin, condemned by the Law of Moses. This viewpoint is not shared by various members of the clergy; it is, however, a fact. The second fact is that the woman is guilty of adultery. The Pharisees know it, Jesus knows it — and she knows it.

The Pharisees seem to think that Jesus is caught in a trap here. He has roughly 3 options:

- ✚ He can condemn the woman to death and risk his popularity as being a friend of the sinner.
- ✚ Alternately, he can plead for her life — and be vulnerable to the charge that he is opposed to the Law of Moses. Search where you will, Christ upholds the law.
- ✚ There is a more subtle option. He can come forth with some pronouncement like, "isn't it a shame that Israel's sin has placed us under Roman rule which forbids us to carry out the Law of Moses?" This will make him one very clever Rabbi — inside the system.
Jesus is God in the flesh, and God makes his own options.

Bent Down

There is a perfect example of mercy here. Despite the fact that the Pharisees are apparently incorrigible, Christ gives them the time to think about what they're doing. It's obvious that they are not just trying to carry out the Law of Moses; if that were the case, they'd have the man caught in adultery with her. They brought the woman only because she makes a more tempting opportunity for misplaced mercy. Christ is not fooled. He bends down and writes with his finger in the dust (and the parallel to God writing with his finger on the tablets given to Moses is disturbingly clear.) In so doing Christ is left us a 2000 year puzzle: what did he write?

The Pharisees refuse to give up. They keep questioning Jesus. So Jesus puts to them the ultimate test of righteousness: if you can stone this woman, you must be without sin. Notice something; if you try to correct this woman, if you try to rescue this woman, if you try to keep her from sinning again — it's okay for you to be a sinner. But if you want to stone her to death — justice without mercy — then you'd better be perfect. Why is this? Because if you want God's mercy you must show a little of your own. The Pharisees are defeated; they leave the field of combat.

Satan Gone

Satan, you will recall, is the accuser of your soul. This woman's accusers perform the same function. There's an important example for us in this. When you come to restore someone, often enough the first thing to do is to vanquish the accuser. There's that voice inside your head that says that you did it, there's nothing you can do to fix it, and you're always going to feel guilty about it. Often enough, the first thing the Christian must do is to say that this is false. Christ, greater than Satan, is merciful. If there is no accuser, there can be no punishment.

Do not from him and think that Christ is condoning her sin. This passage is often interpreted that way in modern times;. After all, sex is a natural drive, a beautiful thing, and therefore we should not go around condemning such people. That is not what Christ did. He rid her of her accusers — and then told her to leave her life of sin. He condemns the sin — but not the sinner. That is grace. Interestingly, you cannot have grace without the condemnation of sin. For if there is no sin, there is no need for grace. Grace, by its very nature being mercy, depends upon the existence of justice first. So Christ does not offer a cheap grace, grace without repentance and confession. He offers her the expensive grace of God, the grace that cost Christ the Cross. Such is the mercy he shows her; such is the mercy we must show to each other.

The Quest - Matthew 7:7-12

Quests and Pilgrimages

Throughout this series on the Sermon on the Mount we have focused on the idea that the Christian life is a pilgrimage. It may come as a surprise to you to know that the ancient church considered some of the non-Christian literature of the time to be excellent sermon examples of this. As we shall see, some of the ancient manuscripts were preserved by monasteries just for this reason.

Stories of the Quest

Permit me to bring to your attention three stories which should be familiar enough to you.

The first is that of *The Odyssey*. The story is familiar enough. At the end of the Trojan War, Ulysses attempts to get home. It takes him something like ten years, and he goes through a great deal of adventure in the process. When he gets home he finds that his faithful wife is being hounded by a number of suitors — whom he probably has to kill. The story is so familiar in Western literature that we speak of “an Odyssey” even today as meaning an epic journey. The point I would bring to you is this: Ulysses was dragged reluctantly (to say the least) from his kingdom to the Trojan War, then having great hardship in the process of getting home. It’s a round-trip journey; the true story is in the journey, not in the destination.

The second might be more familiar to modern readers: *The Wizard of Oz*. The story of Dorothy being dropped in the strange Land of Oz, following the yellow brick road to find the Wizard is well known to all of us. Like Ulysses, Dorothy really didn’t want to be dropped in Oz. The first thing she wanted when she got there was to go home. But note that the story hinges very much on Dorothy making a decision. She could have stay with the munchkins — they were very grateful for her killing the wicked witch — but she chose to seek out the Wizard. She didn’t know what she was getting into, of course. But she chose the adventure rather than the security of staying with the munchkins.

Finally there is *The Hobbit*. It might be fairly said that Dorothy made a conscious choice; Bilbo Baggins was dragged into it. God — in the form of Gandalf the Wizard — sent him on the adventure that was to change him for life. It is no accident that J.R.R. Tolkien, the author, was a Christian. Bilbo himself named his book about his adventure, *There and Back Again*. Geographically Bilbo ended up where he started out. What changed was Bilbo, not his geography. He is the classic image of the Christian on the pilgrimage of life: small, insignificant but touched by God — and off on the adventure of a lifetime. On that adventure he will deal with things far too big for himself. He will challenge great enemies; he will handle great power and yet the story is not really about dragons, magic rings or enchanted forests. The story is about Bilbo — also known as Everyman.

Pilgrim or Hero?

It is very interesting to observe that the ancient pagan writers of heroic epics started with a hero. They naturally assume that someone who was going to take a heroic voyage would have to have a heroic character, be of noble birth and otherwise be qualified for the job. Christian writers do it differently; they tend to prefer the ordinary man caught in extraordinary circumstances. Their protagonist is much more likely to be a pilgrim than a hero. The difference is important. For the hero,

the truth is that the hero changes the world. That's why he was sent on the quest. But the pilgrim is different. The ordinary man of the Christian quest does not change the world — but the quest changes him.

At this point you're probably wondering what on earth I'm babbling about. But consider the parallel I've been putting to you: the Christian life is a pilgrimage, very similar to a quest. The one big difference between the pagan quest and the Christian pilgrimage comes in the tasks to which the Christian is called. Slaying the dragon is something the pagan hero is expected to do; the quest might get the call to work in the nursery. The appeal to the pagan hero is that the quest is high and noble, and therefore worthy of being taken. The appeal to the Christian hero is that it comes from the Lord, even though it might not be high and noble but low and messy.

Let me sum it up this way:

- ✚ The Christian hero might change the world — but that's not the usual case. Most of the time you're just a soldier in the Army of the Lord, doing your duty.
- ✚ For the Christian, the journey itself is the destination. It's not how you change the world, it's how the Christian life changes you that really counts.
- ✚ For the Christian, there is such a thing as home, and you are going there. If there is home, there is hope, which abides.

The Christian Pilgrimage

The Christian pilgrimage is a form of the quest. Like Bilbo Baggins, we have been there (heaven) and we are going back again. You think not?

Ecclesiastes 12:7 NASB then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.

Jeremiah 1:4-5 NASB Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, (5) "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, And before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Round-trip ticket!

Your spirit came from God; your spirit will return to God. In the meanwhile you are on a pilgrimage. Like most pilgrims of literary fame you will find yourself doing things you never thought you would do. They may not be exciting things, or famous things, but they are things that change you. The veil of the future is lifted one day at a time; you do not know what tomorrow brings. The pilgrim walks down the road of life not knowing what might lie around the next curve.

It is therefore proper for us to examine the Christian life as a quest and ask how we should conduct ourselves on this pilgrimage. Ulysses had the aid of the gods (and their opposition sometimes, too). It's a consistent feature of the quest that divine aid is required. We may now examine how that is done.

Conducting a Quest

Matthew 7:7-12 NASB "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. (8) "For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. (9) "Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for

a loaf, will give him a stone? (10) "Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? (11) "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him! (12) "In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

Ask

This is one of the most reassuring passages in the Bible. The word used for "ask" in this passage is very much akin to the word we use for prayer. Indeed, in the old King James Version, you will often see the Shakespearean phrase, "I pray thee." Asking is equivalent to prayer. The original word in the Greek carries with it a meaning of craving or intense desire. The pagans of this time would have been familiar with the word as something you did at your favorite temple to secure the favor of your particular god. To do this you would bring a small, generic representation of a human being called a koros (male version) or kore (female version). In effect, it was a miniature "you." This was your way of telling your goddess that you were devoted to her; you gave yourself to her. Thousands of these things have been found right behind the archaeological sites of ancient Greek temples — in the trash dump, in other words. So while to us the word "ask" simply means to do something verbally, people in those days would have seen it in a much more serious light. The lesson for us is that we are not to ask trivially, but with purpose. Take your prayers seriously.

Seek

Asking is done with the mouth; seeking is done with the heart. It is interesting to note that seeking God is most commonly connected in the Psalms with joy or rejoicing. To seek God leads to joy. Christ told us that he came so that we might have life and have it more abundantly. It is a common misconception that God wants to put an end to all your fun and turn you into some sort of sour persimmon. The truth is quite to the contrary. But to learn that truth, you have to seek God earnestly. It implies a persistence which is uncommon in our society today. We have lived so long in a world of television sitcoms that we think that anything can be solved in twenty-two minutes with breaks for commercials. Seeking God, however, is a lifelong activity. It must be done with a whole heart; but like seeking a particular geography you do it until you get there. It's just that in our case "there" means heaven.

Knock

At this point you are expecting me to give you a Greek word definition for the word "knock." Okay, I'll give you one: it means "knock." As in, bang on the door. If asking is done with the mouth, and seeking is done with a heart then knocking is done with your hands. That's the point. You can ask and seek constantly but if you are not willing to work with your hands for the kingdom of God you will fail the test. But note the response from God if you do. Christ makes an obvious point here; we're a bunch of sinners, yet we treat our children as well as possible. Any reasonable human being takes as good care of his children as he possibly can do it. Now if we do that how much more will the awesome, perfect and sinless God do for us — if we will act like his children?

The progression of ask, seek and knock implies to us that this is not some sort of magic formula. You are familiar with this if you are on the Internet. How many times have you gotten an email that tells

you that if you will repeat this specific prayer, word for word, and then pass it on to 5982 of your closest friends that God will immediately bless you with (a Cadillac, a large amount of money, a new girlfriend, a boat and the lake to sail it on, etc.)? That's not what we're talking about. What we are talking about is that when you are committed to God — by mouth, by heart, soul and body — then he is committed to you. If you are his child, he will treat you like it.

Golden Rule

One of the difficulties of having verse numbers and chapter numbers in the Bible is that we often separate things which should not be separated. Most people are unaware that the Golden rule follows this progression of ask, seek and knock. But it is a very logical conclusion to that.

Think of it this way: let's suppose you were Bilbo Baggins, setting out. Your thoughts would be focused on things like pocket handkerchiefs and a coat, but you should give some thought to how you're going to conduct yourself on this journey. After all, the dwarves who are with you don't really think you're very much to have along. It's not until you have proved yourself that they really welcome you as one of the group. This set of instructions corresponds to that.

In Everything

Note the first two words: "in everything." The Golden Rule starts with integrity. This is not something you do when it's convenient; it's something you do all the time. It's marching orders for the program. This goes back to the previous week's lesson about judging others. If you think about it, one of the effects of judging other people is that they tend to take the blame for what's wrong in your life. Now the phrase "what's wrong" is rather elastic; it might mean that you don't have a big enough fishing boat. But it's human nature to blame other people for our problems. So Christ tells us that instead of doing that we should ask, seek and knock. Did you connect "ask, seek and knock" with the question of judgment? It's an important connection, for God will not give you that for which you ask as long as you continue to blame others for the problem. It's as if He's saying to you, "Hey — knock it off!" Your problem is not that someone else is preventing you from getting what you want; your problem is that you don't ask, seek and knock from the one true God who can give you all good things.

James puts it this way:

James 4:1-3 NASB What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? (2) You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. (3) You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.

Be a Christian of integrity; in everything follow the Golden Rule. This allows God to bless you.

A Matter of Justice

If there was ever a matter of simple justice, the Golden Rule is it. All God is asking you to do is to be fair; treat others the same way you want to be treated. It's not just good social advice; it's justice. It is righteous. And God is righteousness itself; therefore it is no surprise that the Law and the Prophets are summarized in this simple statement. It is a reflection of God himself, of his very character.

Incidentally, this should put to bed the idea that Christ brought out a brand-new morality. There are many people who think that the God of the Old Testament is very, very different from the God revealed in the New Testament. It is not so. The God who is merciful in the Old Testament brings his mercy to its ultimate climax in the New Testament. The New Testament is not a change in direction from the Old Testament; it is the culmination of the Old Testament. The major difference is that the Old Testament expresses this in a negative manner — don't do thus and such to your neighbor, while the New Testament expresses it in the positive.

Building a Relationship

It is fairly clear that the Golden Rule is a great way to build relationships between human beings. But it's also a great way to build your relationship to God. The reasoning is relatively simple. The basic tool in building your relationship to God is the imitation of Christ; you want to be like him. Well, just how does God behave towards the human race at large?

Matthew 5:44-45 NASB "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, (45) so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Do you see it? God causes his blessings to flow even to the evil in this world, so great is his love. The question is not how other people treat you; the question is how you treat other people. Think of it from the point of view of the quest or the pilgrimage. Those evil people are bends in the road, stops in the way. A little later they will be gone. But the way you treated them lingers on in your character, and your character is the key to your relationship with God. If you focus your mind on defeating them, humiliating them and triumphing over them it's very likely you will become like them. But if you come instead to ask, seek and knock — that is, to count upon your Lord for your daily provision, knowing that he loves you — your faith grows. As your faith grows, you grow closer to God.

One Night's March Closer to Home

Remember that I told you that the protagonist in the quest chooses to go on the quest. If you are a Christian, you have chosen to go on the quest that is the Christian life. Like the great quests of literature the quest of the Christian life is a journey of here and back again. You came from God; you will return to God. The destination for the Christian is sure. The question really is with you going to do along the way. Are you going to become a bitter, judgmental person who blames everyone else but himself for his troubles? Or are you going to become a person who refuses to judge the outside world, knowing it's just another stop along the way of the pilgrim? Are you going to become someone whose faith is so triumphant that you know that your heavenly Father will provide all that you need? Each day brings you one night's march closer to home; does it bring you one day's pilgrimage closer to God?

The Straits - Matthew 7:13-20

The Way

Matthew 7:13-14 NASB "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. (14) "For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

(It's an interesting fact¹³ that an early name for Christianity was "The Way.")

The Small Gate

Surely Jesus must've understood that the way to getting a very popular religion would not include telling your followers that only a few would make it. The idea that your religion requires a tough course of life is rather unpopular today. In this author's home church it's hard to detect a sense of suffering and sacrifice the earlier followers of Christ found as normal. So please approach this as a lesson in what Jesus originally said — and I see no reason to think it's false today.

The Greek word used for "small" is somewhat unusual. It carries with it the implication that there are obstacles nearby. That's a common metaphor in Christ's teaching; you might remember the parable of the sower and the soils.¹⁴ In that parable Christ tells us about three kinds of individuals for whom the gospel message has no permanent effect.

- ✚ One is the person who hears the word — and is immediately distracted away from it. Christ's analogy is that the birds eat the seed; we need to remember that there is such a person as Satan. He doesn't want you to hear the gospel, and will do what is necessary to prevent you from listening.
- ✚ The next kind of person is somebody with a shallow life. They're always searching for the newest and latest thing, and the gospel is just one more "latest thing." When it looks like the gospel is going to require lifelong commitment, they move on to something else with a little less work to it.
- ✚ Perhaps most deadly is the person who hears the word, begins to grow and then is choked out by the cares of this world. It's not that I don't want to be a Christian, it's just that I have to worry about the mortgage, the car payments, which schools the kids are going to get into and so on.

Surprisingly, when you tell people something like this they react in a rather unusual way. They have the idea that God is not particularly fussy; he'll forgive just about anybody and that it doesn't really matter what you believe. Let's examine that notion. Nature is the creation of that very same God. You can tell what God is like by looking at nature, and one of the most consistent things is that God allows nature to act in exactly one way. We don't have competing laws of gravity working on survival of the fittest, for example. We have the fixed laws of nature. If you want stuff to work, you have to follow the natural laws. In short, you have to do it God's way. Tell me: why do you think it would be any different in matters spiritual?

Therefore Christ tells you that you are to "make every effort"¹⁵ to get through this small gate. That implies that there is effort required, but it is difficult, and that you need to get to work.

¹³ See Acts 24:22

¹⁴ Matthew 13:3-9

¹⁵ Luke 13:24, which is the parallel passage.

The Narrow Way

If the gate is small, the road leading up to it is narrow. The Greek word used for narrow has an interesting couple of possibilities. It can often be translated as “crowded.” You can kind of picture a bunch of people coming in from a broad area and trying all to funnel in through this narrow little path. Strangely enough, the word for narrow is closely related to the word for “tribulation” as well. By this careful selection of words Christ is trying to tell you that not only will you find the balancing act of staying on the road quite difficult, but you can have a lot of trouble along the way too. There is some confusion about this word because of the translation in the King James. The word used for “narrow” in the King James is “strait.” That’s the same word we use in “Straits of Gibraltar”, meaning a narrow sea lane that goes by Gibraltar. It is unrelated to the word “straight”, but they are homonyms and this has caused some confusion.

It introduces us to the concept of holiness. Holiness sounds like something that’s very ceremonial, but it actually means something which is set apart. Something which is holy, in the original sense of the word, is something which is set apart for a particular purpose. Perhaps an example might make this a little clearer. But suppose you want to go to a concert arena to listen to a concert. You, and all the other ticketholders, are going to go through the front door in a large crowd. The rock group which you would adore, on the other hand, is going to go through a small door in the back, guarded by a mean, large and ugly security guard. They are going through “the narrow way”; they are in the original sense of the word “holy.” They are set apart. The concept is much the same for us. Most of the world is going to try to get through the front door with the rest of the crowd. Their motto in life is to get along and go along, do what the crowd does, and be like other people. The Christian is told that he cannot do this; he has to try the other path. The result is that you are going to be “different.” Teenagers in America have an absolute horror of this idea; youth ministers worked very hard to teach their charges to be different, while telling them all along that they’re not different, they are really cool, and in fact are not going the other way, but they are leading. One wonders whether this sleight-of-hand is actually effective when the high school student reaches college. The truth is that the Christian is genuinely different; he is walking a different road and living a different way.

Note that a strait is bounded on two sides. A parallel for us would be to look at it that legalism is on the right and “free thought” is on the left. Satan’s intent is to push you to one side or the other, it doesn’t matter which. For once he can push you off the path, you’re off the path. That’s his objective. It doesn’t matter which wrong way you go, you’re going the wrong way.

The Few

Of course one might ask the question: just why does God do it this way? Well, does God really need more than a few? While it is quite the case of Scripture says that “whosoever will” can be saved, it’s also true that God has a taste for using the few, rather than the many. If you recall your Old Testament, you recall Gideon reducing his forces down to 300 men.¹⁶ This just might be a matter of self-selection; after all, Marines are volunteers.

¹⁶ Judges 7:1-8

Okay, you are wondering where I got that crack about Marines.

The Greek word for “few” can also be used as an adjective, meaning “puny.” There is an interesting parallel in the Old Testament. Paul references this in Romans 9:27-29, in which he refers to the “remnant.” It is a fact that over and over again in the Old Testament God winnows out Israel by trial and tribulation, Exodus and exile, and returns to himself just a very small portion of those who started out. That portion is called the remnant. God told Elijah that he had 7000 who had not bowed the knee.¹⁷ The same concept is at work here.

That may seem uncomfortable to you. After all, we are raised to believe that the majority is always right — especially in disputed things. If you want to know which way to go, you hold an election, or at least take a public opinion poll. What Jesus is telling you here is that the public opinion poll is likely enough to give me the wrong answer. You have to look for the truth and act accordingly.

A Military Analogy

Matthew 7:15-20 NASB "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. (16) "You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? (17) "So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. (18) "A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. (19) "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (20) "So then, you will know them by their fruits.

Pardon this old soldier's analogy, but I think it a very apt one. The world is booby-trapped. Things look good, but they'll blow up in your face if you let them. We shall now see how this works.

Camouflage

Have you ever noticed that the traffic department tends to have signs in day glow colors, with flashing lights, simple but gruesome graphics along with very substantial concrete barriers? There's a reason for this. There are things out there on the road that are not good for you or your car; it's the traffic department's job to make sure you don't run into them. They understand that you're not particularly good at noticing the fact that the bridges are out. They have enough experience to know that if you don't put up a barricade and a large number of warning signs people will go around whatever you put there and drive out under the middle of the bridge and off the bridge and into the river without hesitation. If you give them a chance, they'll do it twice. We use bright, visible warning signs because nothing else will work. Even then, people will ignore them.

Things would be a little easier for you to get Satan to do the same thing. But in point of fact Satan camouflages his booby-traps so that you think that everything is just fine; in fact, his booby-traps make you think that everything is wonderful. Let's look at the major categories.

✚ Things usually start with the temptations of the flesh. A young man's fancy very quickly turns to... a young woman. We are very good at making excuses and rationalization for our behavior, and it is no secret that most Christians today believe there is nothing wrong with sex outside of marriage. As a

¹⁷ First Kings 19:18

personal observation, the ministry seems to have given up speaking against this. The facts haven't changed however; a promiscuous start in life makes maintaining a long-term marriage relationship much more difficult. Camouflage? How about the statement, "how can anything his beautiful a sex possibly be wrong?" Isn't that just simply moral camouflage?

- ✚ The temptations the flesh may eventually fade — though I've known some elderly men who have vintage testosterone — but there quickly replaced by the temptations of the world. We've got to have the right car, live in the right neighborhood, have a cabin in the mountains, with a boat on the lake, and our kids in the right schools. All of these things promise us the reward of success. But have you ever noticed that when you get these things, something else always pops up to take their place? If you get the boat, well, then you have to get the right car. Once you have the right car you need to get that cabin. It never ends — until you die and go to hell.
- ✚ The best camouflaged of all temptations is pride. Let's look at it this way: "I'm too good a Christian to have sex outside of marriage; I'm not tempted by the newest car and having a boat; I'm above all that. I am a great Christian." You might as well brag about how proud you are to be so humble. Pride is an excellent cure to the temptations of the flesh and the world; C. S. Lewis remarked that it's like curing your cold by giving you cancer. How so? Pride is the devil's own sin; he wants to be like God.

Decoys and Deceptions

Of course, once you've gotten past the booby-traps of temptation there are still the decoys and deceptions. It's not sufficient to avoid the wrong things; you also have to do the right things. Decoys and deception tries to fool you into doing something other than the right thing, thinking that it is the right thing. Let me give you some examples.

- ✚ One of the most common is legalism. We've been saying all along that you have to find the narrow way, and that implies that there is one specific set of behavior that you have to adopt. The deception is that you can adopt a set of rules and regulations to make this happen. How people can do this and also talk about grace the same time is always a puzzle — but legalists seem to be particularly good at solving it.
- ✚ Another deception, quite common these days, is the message of cheap grace. Jesus is presented as Savior, but not as Lord. If you're having problems with your life, Jesus is the answer. Raise your hand and join the church and all will be well. Repentance? Well, we don't really think that's all that necessary. After all, you have problems, not sins. This is often presented as the antidote to legalism. You will not die cyanide poisoning if the strychnine gets you first.
- ✚ Perhaps the most common throughout Christian history is the idea that you can be a Christian with a limited commitment. One writer put it that you "do a corner in Jesus Christ." Jesus is confined to the holy section of the house, prominently displayed so that all will know that you are a real Christian. As long as you do what's on the minimum to do list, you're just fine.

By Their Fruits

We have identified several of the decoys and deceptions, and the camouflage temptations. The problem, of course, is that we can't give you every explicit minor detail of how these things are going to work. How do you know when you're being misled?

First, you're going to be misled by people. You notice that all of those mistakes up there are created by, administered by and enthusiastically supported by people. So the real question boils down to this: how do you know which people are misleading you? Remember, some of those people misleading you don't know that that's what they're doing; they are sincerely wrong. They may be

goodhearted about it, but wrong. To put it in my mother's language, "all the other lemmings are going over the cliff..." So you see that you can't just look for an evil personality. If I might be pardoned a personal example: I wear an eye patch just like a pirate. Most of the time the little children think it's cool, but every now and then I find a four-year-old who is convinced that they have found the source of all evil. They judge me by my looks. We have the same problem as adults, though we are usually not fooled by an eye patch. But we might be fooled by smooth speech, dignified position or worldly success. So what are we supposed to do?

We are supposed to judge them by the fruits they produce. The first thing we have to notice about this is that this will take time and patience. It's not something you can tell right away. So be patient about it, think kindly of people — but be on your guard.

One of the key problems you have here is that these people will be *inside* the church. Do you remember the parable of the wheat and the weeds?¹⁸ Christ makes it explicitly clear that there will be people who are deceivers who are in the church; he will not remove them until he comes again to judge the living and the dead. The reason is very simple; if you were those people out of their seats at the first sign of trouble, the church will be in constant turmoil. It is just possible that Christ is being merciful to people like this in the hopes that they will not continue to be misled, and therefore mislead others. So then have to face the fact that the deceivers are within us. So what are we looking for?

- ✚ The most obvious sign is that they cause dissension and disharmony. This is necessarily an absolute indicator, but it is something to watch. The reason it's not an absolute indicator is that if someone comes into the church with a brand-new doctrine that smells a little funny, the people who think it smells funny can also be accused of causing dissension and disharmony. Spotting dissension and disharmony is fairly easy; knowing who's at fault is a little more difficult.
- ✚ One way to tell which person is causing the problem is to look for signs of obviously false and unsound doctrine. If your minister is telling you to light a candle, cross your legs on your yoga mat and recite "Om" then perhaps you should be on your guard.
- ✚ Another good sign that you have a problem is in the leader who is obviously in it for personal gain. The most obvious kind of personal gain is monetary; this fact causes me to question those who preach the "prosperity gospel." As Ray Stevens sings it, would Jesus wear a Rolex? But there is also the personal gain of status and ego. Please make a distinction here: there are some of us who are plain pigs for praise and compliments. We do what we do because of the love of the Lord, but when you tell us that were good at it we like it. There are others who do it because it enhances their position in life and strokes their ego. The difference will become plain in time; those who do it for ego gratification will be reluctant to offend you with the truth. Those who do it for the love of the Lord will be reluctant to conceal the truth from you because the damage that would do.

Who Is He?

All this leads up to the question: just how do I know what this narrow gate and way really are? If you want the right answers, you have to ask the right questions. It's not "what?" It's "who?"

¹⁸ Matthew 13:24-30

Who Is Jesus?

The great paradox of Christianity is that it is not a set of rules and regulations; it is not so much a lifestyle as a Lordship. The small gate in the narrow way is Jesus. In that most personal of Gospels, John, we see Jesus describes this way:

- ✚ He calls himself the door of the sheep¹⁹. He is explicitly telling you that the path is following him wherever it might lead. He is the entrance portal.
- ✚ He calls himself “the good Shepherd.”²⁰ This is a commonly used phrase; consider its implications. The Shepherd guides his sheep; Jesus guides his followers. The Shepherd protects his sheep; if you let him, he will protect you. The question is whether or not you will act like sheep — and follow.
- ✚ He calls himself “the true vine.”²¹ We’ve been talking about recognizing people by their fruits; it applies to those of good fruits as well. If you see someone whose life is full of the fruit of the Spirit then you know that this is someone who is in living contact with Jesus. Conversely, however, if they are not in living contact with Jesus you will not see those fruits. It is therefore important that you examine yourself to see if you find those fruits of the Spirit.²²
- ✚ You are what you eat — or at least they told us that back in college when we were eating the food at the dorm. It was not an encouraging thought. But the principle applies spiritually; Christ tells us that he is the “bread of life.”²³ If you spend your time watching salacious sitcoms, filling your mind with the world’s philosophy, when you should be in contact with your Lord (learning what he wants you to learn), the results will quickly become clear. Is your spiritual leader Jesus Christ, or Homer Simpson?
- ✚ He tells you that he is “the light of the world.”²⁴ let’s take that a little more literally than usual. Most of the people in this world have no idea why the world is so screwed up. That’s why politicians can sell them any number of crazy ideas; if you don’t know what the problem is, it’s really hard to pick the right solution. If something goes bump in the night, you turn on the light to see what it is. We do that physically, but were really reluctant to do that spiritually. The spiritual equivalent is listening to Jesus, particularly in reading the Scriptures. Do this long enough, the light goes on, and you see what’s really wrong with this world. You may not be able to fix it, but you can at least duck.
- ✚ In this world he is “the way, the truth and the Life.” That sums it up about nicely. As one of the great Saints observed, without the way there is no going. Without the truth there is no knowing; without the life there is no living.²⁵
- ✚ It is not just in this world that he is our Shepherd, but also in the world to come. As he told Martha, he is the “resurrection and the life.”²⁶ if we have guidance and light in this world only, we still face the same fate of all mankind: death. But our Lord has promised to return, bringing with him those who have died in the faith. We are to be raised to a new body, given the new life in the new heaven and the new earth. I do not know what this means; but I know who said it — and I trust him completely. He will make it happen.

¹⁹ John 10:7

²⁰ John 10:11

²¹ John 15:1

²² Galatians 5:22-23

²³ John 6:8

²⁴ John 8:12

²⁵ Thomas a Kempis

²⁶ John 11:25

The very son of God descended from heaven and became a man like us. He was sacrificed on the cross, died and then rose again. He ascended into heaven and will return — soon. The small gate and the narrow way are not a “what”; they are “who.”

Take up the Cross

There is a curious consistency among those who Jesus best. They will consistently tell you that the Christian life consists of taking up the Cross. The three most consistent themes that arise when someone mentions this are these:

- ✚ Sacrifice. In this world you going to have trouble, and if you want to do what is right and follow your Lord and Master, you are going to have to sacrifice. You’re going to have to give up what the world calls good things. You may have to sacrifice your possessions; your ego; your desires; sometimes even those you love. You sacrifice a lower priority for the highest priority.
- ✚ You are going to endure suffering. Trust me on this one, the world is going to make it happen. Christ said he is the light of the world; he also said that you and I are the light of the world. The truth is the cockroaches don’t like it when the light goes on. Unfortunately, the cockroaches are in charge.
- ✚ You must approach all of this with a childlike faith. Christianity is not the religion of the cynic or the doubter, but the one who trusts. It is no accident that one of the great descriptions of the church is as the bride of Christ. Those who been married any length of time will tell you that trust is absolutely essential to a successful marriage relationship. That’s true with a man and woman; that’s true with Christ and his church. Keep the faith.

This is sort of like the final exam in your algebra class. You’d like it to be easy; it’s hard. But it’s not optional; if you want to pass, there’s only one way to solve the problems. Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life.

Lord, Lord - Matthew 7:21-29

We come to the end of the Sermon on the Mount. If the Christian life is, as we have suggested, a pilgrimage then it must have a destination. This is our Lord's final warning concerning the journey — and how to get to the real destination.

Not Everyone

Matthew 7:21-23 NASB "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. (22) "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' (23) "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.'

False Signs

One of the characteristic logical errors common to the scientific age runs something like this:

- ✚ If Joe is a major league baseball player, then he will have a baseball bat.
- ✚ Joe has a baseball bat.
- ✚ Therefore, Joe is a major league baseball player.

All you need is one Little League baseball player with a bat to prove that this is false. But the same type of logic can be applied to religion, and it seems much more acceptable there. Let's try the same logic again:

- ✚ If Fred is divinely inspired, then he will be able to work miracles.
- ✚ Fred is able to work miracles.
- ✚ Therefore, Fred is divinely inspired.

Doesn't that second set of logic seem so much more appealing? But it is exactly the same logic, and it is every bit as false. Our Lord warns us here that we will see many who prophesy in his name, cast out demons in his name and even perform miracles in his name — and are headed straight to hell. This, of course, brings up the question: why?

Christ does not definitely tell us in this instance just why this would be so, but I think there is a relatively simple explanation. Permit me an example. I am a teacher of the gospel; I teach a relatively small class. I believe I could successfully defend myself against the charge of having done great things for Christ; indeed, I would argue that I should be content with doing small things for Christ. That's what he's called me to do. This small class, however, is part of a very large church — and the preacher in the church has every reason to feel pleased with his accomplishments, which are far greater than mine. But because his accomplishments are so much greater, the temptations that come with them are greater too. The temptation is to think and act as if you believed that "God owes me." In other words, I've done such wonderful things that surely God recognizes that he is in my debt. I have a lot of favors with God that I can call in any time I want.

This, of course, is pride — and a most stubborn and enduring pride it is. (The reader will note that I am not accusing our preacher of this.) Great accomplishments bring the temptation of great pride. Such pride is the sin of Satan himself, and a ticket to suffering at the least and hell and damnation at the end. This is so serious a consequence that our Lord warns against it in the most serious way.

There is a minor temptation in here for the humble Christian. We can take this to an extreme and decide that anyone with such achievements must, therefore, be going to hell. This is just as much a logical fallacy; our Lord warns against it in the parable of the wheat and the weeds.²⁷

I Never Knew You

We may now take a look at Christ's reaction to such people. He tells them that he never knew them. The word in the Greek implies something more than a casual acquaintance; we could not safely conclude that Christ had no knowledge of their existence, for example. The meaning is fairly clear; there is no personal relationship here. That is a devastating thought, especially for someone who thinks that he's achieved greatness in the kingdom of God. So for anyone who has achieved anything in the kingdom of God the question, "how would I know" is something which must be addressed.

Christ tells us. It is the practice of lawlessness. We may take a look at this in a little bit more detail:

- ✚ Lawlessness we understand – it is the breaking of clearly understood code. Sin is lawlessness.
- ✚ The key word is "practice." This is not a demand that you are perfect; it's a demand that you do not continuously practice lawlessness.
- ✚ Why is this important? Because sin, in the presence of God, is not permissible. For this we have forgiveness — but if you continue to practice it without seeking forgiveness, then what?

There is another trap in here. There are those who think that God will forgive, and therefore they can do as they please. This wouldn't work with your mother; what makes you think it will work with God?

Christ's reaction to all this? He throws you out. There are several instances where he repeats this theme in the Scripture; perhaps he meant for us to understand it clearly and definitely. There will come a time where the habitual sinner will be removed from the presence of God to spend eternity in hell. It's that serious.

Who Does the Will

At this point things don't sound so good for the average Christian, do they? But if you look back up at the Scripture, you will see that those who **do** the will of the Father are the ones who get into heaven. So we might well ask, just what is the will of the Father?

- ✚ One answer is that we are to behold Christ, and believe in him.²⁸ We are assured that the result is eternal life and the resurrection to come.
- ✚ We are also taught that the will of God is to know Christ, for this implies that you know the Father.²⁹
- ✚ Indeed, Christ declares that those who do the will of the father are in effect his brothers and sisters.³⁰

²⁷ Matthew 13:24-30.

²⁸ John 6:37-40

²⁹ John 14:6-7

³⁰ Matthew 12:46-50

Hear and Act

Matthew 7:24-27 NASB "Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. (25) "And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. (26) "Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. (27) "The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell--and great was its fall."

To Hear

If you'd like to see some interesting results on your computerized Bible search, look up the phrase, "hear the word of the Lord." Especially in the Old Testament you will find that this is almost exclusively reserved for the prophets. It is a command, and a highly imperative one.

- ✦ There's a tremendous power in this command; God tells the prophet Ezekiel that he is to prophesy to the dry bones in the valley and tell them that they are to hear the word of the Lord.³¹
- ✦ Indeed, the power of God seems to be wrapped up in the word of God. It is by his word that he created the universe, and such power is still his.
- ✦ So powerful is his word that the apostle John tells us that Christ is the incarnate Word of God.³²
So one might think that was such power behind the command, everyone would listen. We obviously know that is not the case. But we should note that the command in question is given to "everyone." It is personal; it does not seem to have exceptions. You have been warned.

So why is it was such a warning that we don't have practically everyone in church on Sunday morning? Our Lord explained this in the parable of the soils³³. The word gets out to everyone — at least in our society — but some of us have it snatched away from us; some of us are such shallow people that it never really takes root; and others have the crowded out by the cares of this world. This is yet another warning that it could happen to us.

To Act

Okay, you're going to hear the word if you live in America, at least. The question is, what you going to do about it?

Curiously, Christ seems to imply here that you're going to have trials and tribulations whether you act upon his word or not. Trials and tribulations are just part of life; the results of those trials and tribulations depend upon the preparations you make. So we can safely conclude that the idea that a Christian never has any problems belongs to somebody's book of fairy tales.

So, how exactly does a wise man prepare for such trials and tribulations? Here's what's Solomon has to say:

³¹ Ezekiel 37:4

³² John 1:1-5

³³ Mark 4:14-20

Proverbs 14:16 NASB A wise man is cautious and turns away from evil, But a fool is arrogant and careless.

It might seem that such advice is rather generic; but, after all, Christ talks about the foundation — not the details of the walls and the windows. The key point is to do this before the trials and tribulations hit; which, since you have no idea when they're coming, means you should do this first thing. Get the foundation right, get it right quickly and work from there. Just don't put it off.

To Not Act

Can we begin with an obvious point? The foolish man's house looks pretty much like the wise man's house. The difference is in the foundation. This is a really good reason not to judge your fellow Christians. You don't know how they laid the foundation. All you can see are the walls and the windows. The warning is personal; you are to take care of your own foundation, not worry about somebody else's. That applies unless you happen to be a teacher, and the passage you're teaching on this week happens to be in Matthew chapter 7. It is then the teacher's business to warn you — to take it personally.

So what happens if you don't like the correct foundation? Note that the trials and tribulations of such a person are the same as for those who lay the foundation carefully. In other words, you can't tell who the real Christian is from the fake one just by the trials and tribulations they're going through. That cuts both ways. It means first that if you don't lay the foundation correctly you're going to encounter trials and tribulations that will sweep you away. But it also means to your fellow Christians that they can't tell what kind of Christian you are just from the trials and tribulations themselves. Job has quite a bit to say on the subject; you will recall that his three friends were convinced that he was some sort of gigantic secret sinner because of all the trials and tribulations he had. The argument was that God must be punishing him for something, and since the punishment was severe, it must be something big. Neither Job nor they were ever told the real reason; nor does he tell us about our sufferings.

What we are to observe is this: the collapse is catastrophic. May I give you a parallel, please? Your teacher lives in Southern California; those of you who are not familiar with the area might conclude that flood insurance is something which would be completely useless. After all, you guys live in the middle of the desert, right?

So did Noah, my friends. The existence of the desert flash flood, and more commonly the swift flow of water which is not held back by the light vegetation of the California hills can cause quite a flood. So just because the place looks like it would never have a flood doesn't mean you are safe. It's like Solomon says: time and chance happen to all³⁴.

Authority of Christ

Matthew 7:28-29 NASB When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching; (29) for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

³⁴ Ecclesiastes 9:11

Reaction: Then

It is a truism that we don't understand people of other places and times. Such people made differing assumptions about the universe around them. In this time, the people had advantage over those of us who live in these modern days. They clearly understood the awe that was due to Almighty God. It was not just the common people who understood this, but the scribes and the elders of the nation of Israel. There was a clear distinction between the authority of a scribe, which we might call expert authority, and the authority of God, which is intrinsic.

The priests and elders understood this, and therefore they had a logical question for Jesus concerning the authority with which he taught. Here's the story.

Matthew 21:23-27 NASB When He entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him while He was teaching, and said, "By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?" (24) Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. (25) "The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?" And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Then why did you not believe him?' (26) "But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the people; for they all regard John as a prophet." (27) And answering Jesus, they said, "We do not know." He also said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

This incident clearly highlights the question of authority; it also shows us that the people judge such authority by its consistency with God. The common man had no great theological prowess, but he understood a prophet when he heard one. And John the Baptist was one that he heard. The method of judgment was his consistency with the message of God — John the Baptist sounds just like one of the Old Testament prophets. He behaved like one too. So the people believed he was one. This explains why the common person heard Jesus gladly; his message was the good news of God.

It is therefore important to us to pay attention to Christ's claim of authority. Either his claim to authority is false, or it is true. If he claims to have authority on the basis of God, then what ever he claims must either be completely true or completely false. He's a fraud, a lunatic or the son of God. If you believe that he is the son of God, then you must accept his claim to authority. So, just what is his claim to authority?

Matthew 28:18 NASB And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.

If this is true, then we should accept his warnings in this passage (and others) as being of primary importance.

Reaction: Now

When you show this to a modern citizen of the United States, the usual reaction is, "you can't really mean that." But as we have just shown, the logical options don't include any middle ground. Why is it, then, that the modern citizen thinks that he can find a more reasonable alternative?

First, it is because of the impact of the philosophy of Postmodernism. One of the core beliefs of this philosophy is that there is no such thing as absolute truth. It's the primary logical fallacy of the

philosophy: “it is absolutely true that there is no such thing as absolute truth.” This philosophy is clearly contradictory to classic Christianity, was Lord claims to be the “way, the truth and the life.”

It’s worth asking how this philosophy became so widely accepted. One reason for it is the desire for a standard of proof which conforms to the modern God, science. If you examine the logic, it seems absurd. But if you don’t examine the logic, it sounds very nice to say that everything which is true must be capable of being proven scientifically. Let’s think about that: can you scientifically prove that Napoleon lost the battle of Waterloo? You can prove it historically; but you can’t prove it scientifically. The standards of scientific proof are so high that most of history simply cannot be proven to such standards. That’s not a criticism of history; it’s a criticism of applying the wrong logical standards of proof to a particular problem.

A similar example might be made with regard to the question of trust. It’s obvious that a successful marriage is built upon mutual trust. Can you in fact expect to verify that trust to scientific standards? Well, you could hire a detective to follow your wife around all the time to see if she is unfaithful to you. If you did that, however, you would destroy the trust she has in you. The very act of determining whether or not she is trustworthy kills the trust so necessary for the marriage. You cannot scientifically prove that your wife is faithful to you — and you’d be an idiot to try.

The average denizen of our century therefore rejects the phrase, “because God said so.” That’s never been a standard for nonbelievers; it’s now ceasing to be a standard for believers. Think about the sermons you’ve heard recently, considering marriage as an example. How often has the preacher referred to someone psychological study as being a good reason for you to take (or not take) some particular course of action? As a modern citizen, you’re not about to believe the authority of the Scriptures. You want your truth to come out of pop psychology. And pop psychology says nothing about the judgment to come. Pop psychology says everything is relative; your problem isn’t that you are sinful; it’s that you feel guilty.

Which Way?

It appears that you have three choices.

- ✚ You can do things in the way of the world, the way the Christ described as being broad and well-traveled. For the Christian, this is been a trap that is been known for centuries and we are often warned against it.
- ✚ There is a more insidious route. We might call this the “way of the easy church.” It involves what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called cheap grace. We offer God’s forgiveness without repentance; we don’t demand that you behave righteously. As long as you’re better than somebody else, as long as you done your little bit, you are happy with conversion and no results. This does make people feel good — and it doesn’t require a lot of effort. As far as I can tell, its only drawback is that it doesn’t work.
- ✚ Then there is the narrow way — a pilgrimage, not a voyage on a cruise ship. The world tells you to be comfortable where you are; the easy church tells you that you’re on a spiritual journey, just like being on a cruise. Christ tells you that the way is narrow and the gate small.

Aim carefully.