

2 - THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Introduction

What is the best sermon that you have ever heard? If you are like me, you have heard at least several thousand sermons in your lifetime. Does any of them stand out enough so that you could say it is the best that you have ever heard? Dennis Kinlaw preached the best sermon I have ever heard, at Yearly Meeting six years ago. It was from John 15:1-11 and was about abiding in Jesus and obeying His commandments. But what about you? What was the best sermon that you have ever heard?

I don't know what the best sermon that you've ever heard is but I do know beyond any doubt the best sermon that has ever been preached. That sermon was preached by Jesus and recorded in Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7. It is called the Sermon on the Mount and is the second part of our Discipleship Trilogy.

It is my personal opinion that every Christian should master these three chapters. I believe that mastering them is essential if we desire to become like Jesus and have the power to live. Christians who try to live their Christian lives without knowing what Jesus says in these chapters is like a brain surgeon trying to operate on a brain tumor without knowing any more than I do about the brain. Such Christians would be just as incompetent in living life as such a brain surgeon would be in brain surgery. That is why I insist that you and I should study and master what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount. Which is exactly what we will be doing for the next several months.

To assist you in your efforts to master these chapters, I would challenge you to read Dallas Willard's commentary on them in his book The Divine Conspiracy. It begins on page 97. I have read several commentaries on the Sermon including G. Campbell Morgan's. But Willard's is by far the best I have ever read on the Sermon or really any other passage or book in the Bible. Many of you know Chuck McGowan and I think that he agrees with what I just said.

However you do it, prayerfully work your way through these chapters asking the Holy Spirit to make their words transforming, powerful and alive inside you.

As with any passage of Scripture, our challenge is to interpret what Jesus said and Matthew wrote down correctly. We must figure out what Jesus intended to say in speaking the words that he spoke. There are two keys in that regard. There are two things that we must keep in mind as we read them.

THE FIRST KEY TO INTERPRETING THE SERMON

The first key to interpreting the Sermon on the Mount is understanding this – chapters 5 through 7 are an organized sermon with a unified theme.

Some commentators believe that these chapters are not a single discourse but a collection of sayings from different discourses. That is the view of R.V.G. Tasker, for instance, in the commentary he wrote on Matthew for the Tyndale Series. Tasker argues that these three chapters are a collection of a group of smaller sayings that Jesus spoke to different groups of people on different occasions.

But other commentators adhere to an opposite view. They contend that these chapters are a single discourse. It is a sermon that Jesus preached to a specific group of people on one specific occasion. This would be like the sermon that I preach to you every Sunday morning.

Whether chapters 5 through 7 are a collection of smaller discourses or one discourse matters greatly. Which view that we hold will determine how we interpret many of the verses and sections in them. It will determine how we interpret the Beatitudes, for instance, in 5:3-12.

Having studied both views and the arguments for them, I believe that chapters 5 through 7 are a single discourse. It is a sermon that Jesus preached on one occasion to a specific group of people.

5:1-2 (read it) shows us what that occasion and group of people were. A massive crowd of common people came to Jesus so that He could minister to them. This crowd was so massive in fact that He went to a high place so that everyone could see and hear Him. After His disciples had finally gathered around Him, He then addressed the crowd.

Now, because this is a single sermon, it has an organized and unified theme.

A few months ago, a Friends pastor friend of mine called me one Saturday evening around 8:00 and talked with me until almost 9:30. In the course of our conversation, he told me that he was just starting to put an outline together for his sermon. He had some ideas, he said, and would finish organizing them on Sunday morning. The truth is that this pastor friend of mine doesn't prepare much for his sermons. He just sort of shoots from the hip so to speak. He is a great guy but he rambles in his sermons. Much of what he says is really just a succession of disconnected themes that he makes remarks about.

Jesus was the greatest preacher and I'm sure orator who ever lived. You can be sure that He never just rambled and that is the case here in chapters 5 through 7. He isn't just making random comments about a series of disconnected themes. On the contrary, He carefully organizes His sermon so that there is a continuity and flow to it.

This sermon, like all good sermons, is made up of pericopes. A pericope is a section of verses that address one particular subject or issue. 5:3-12, for instance, is the introduction to the Sermon and is a pericope about the condition of the people to whom Jesus is speaking. 5:13-20 is a second pericope that shows the new type of humanity that God can make these people into. You can see that there is a continuity to these two pericopes and that one flows naturally from the other. That is in fact how the entire Sermon flows – from one pericope to another.

That is my view at least and you will need to decide if it's yours. Again, the issue is deciding one of two things. #1 – the pericopes are disconnected teachings given on different occasions. Or #2 – the pericopes are part of an organized sermon and each flows into the next. Which one of those that you believe will determine how you interpret the pericopes.

7:7-11 is an example of this. Those who believe #1 will interpret this passage far differently than those who believe #2. Those who believe #1 interpret this to be about asking God and those who believe #2 interpret it to be about asking people.

THE SECOND KEY TO INTERPRETING THE SERMON

There is a second key to interpreting the Sermon on the Mount. There is a second thing that we must keep in mind. The first thing is that it is an organized sermon with a unified theme,

which is my view at least. The second thing is that this unified theme is what a kingdom person and a kingdom life look like.

This unified theme derives from the larger context in which Jesus preached it. We find that larger context in 4:17. It can be argued that this is the single most important verse in the Bible with regard to the power to live.

Let me ask you a question, "What was the central message or theme of Jesus' preaching and teaching?" We really do know that answer to that because the Bible tells us. What is it? Does anyone know?

Matthew 4:17 and Mark 1:15 make it clear. The central message or theme of Jesus' preaching and teaching was, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Notice that Matthew 4:17 uses the term "kingdom of heaven" while Mark 1:15 uses the term "the kingdom of God." It's clear that Jesus interchangeably. They mean the same thing in other words. I will be using the term, kingdom of God, in our discussion of it.

Notice what Jesus preached about the kingdom of God. It is at hand. The kingdom of God is at hand. Understanding what that means is central to discipleship and the power to live. So let's try to understand it by breaking it down into two parts. #1 – the kingdom of God. #2 – is at hand.

- **what "the kingdom of God" means**

Let's start with the first part and define what a kingdom is. An analogy will help us do that. That analogy is the King of Morocco. We would all agree that the nation of Morocco is his kingdom.

My question to you though is, "what makes that nation his kingdom?" The nation of Morocco is his kingdom because what he commands and wants done is done in that nation. If he comes to the United States, is the United States then his kingdom? It is not because he has no authority here and what he commands and wants done isn't done here.

That helps us understand what the kingdom of God is. It is the range of His effective will. It is the realm where what He commands and wants done is done.

Matthew 6:10 makes this perfectly clear. In the opening line, we ask that God's kingdom come. In the next line, we ask that His will be done. The second line merely defines the first. God's kingdom is where what He wants done is done.

Now, there are two primary organizing principles and realities in God's kingdom. The first is the person of God Himself, the utterly lovely and competent being we will begin discussing next week. The second is the action of God's will, which means the things that He does. This is what I called the power of God last week. So the person and power of God are the two primary components of the kingdom of God.

Now that we know **what** the kingdom of God is, let's determine **where** it is.

So I ask you that question. Where is the kingdom of God? Where is the realm where what He wants done is done? Can you identify for me specifically where that is?

First, matter is within the kingdom of God. When I say matter I mean atoms in all their combinations and the equations, laws, and formulas that they involve. All the matter in the universe functions as God wills it to function and so it is part of His kingdom.

Suppose you decide to make homemade bread. It rises and then bakes because of a whole series of chemical reactions involving atoms. The atoms and reactions involved in baking the bread function as God wills them to. The bread bakes because those atoms and reactions are part of God's kingdom.

Second, certain institutions on earth are within the kingdom of God. Compassion International is a legitimate Christian organization that exists to meet the basic needs of poverty-stricken children around the world in the name of Jesus. Compassion International is doing what God wants done. It is within His kingdom.

Third, the inner and outer lives of certain individuals are within the kingdom of God. My favorite saint is Francis of Assisi. I just finished reading a biography about him that my son Moses gave me for my birthday. Francis took the commands of God literally and tried to live out each and every one of them. So, his life and he were within the kingdom of God.

So, that is where the kingdom of God is: in matter, in certain institutions, and in the inner and outer lives of certain individuals.

You can infer from what I've said that God permits His kingdom to be absent from certain domains and realms.

First, He permits His kingdom to be absent from political domains. The Taliban government, for instance, with its oppression of women and non-Muslims was outside of God's kingdom. The same is true of communist China's government.

Second, God permits His kingdom to be absent from social domains. American popular culture, epitomized by MTV, is a classic example of this. God's kingdom is absent from American popular culture. Many local school boards and systems are another example of this.

Third, God permits His kingdom to be absent from the person and lives of individual human beings. The vast majority of people on planet earth are doing their wills not God's. His kingdom is truly absent from their lives. I think of the lawyer, for example, who told me, "I'm not going to have some God that I can't see running my life."

I'd summarize it this way. Remember I said that the primary organizing principles and realities of the kingdom of God is the person of God and the action of His will. Everything that obeys and acts consistently with those principles and realities, whether by nature (matter) or choice (human beings) is within that kingdom. Everything that does not obey and act consistently with them is outside that kingdom.

So that's what the kingdom of God is. It is the realm where what He wants done is done. Its primary organizing principles are the person and power of God.

- what "is at hand" means

Now let's look at the second part of the central message of Jesus, "is at hand."

A lot of Christians misinterpret what that means. They interpret "at hand" to mean "will soon come." They interpret Jesus to be saying that the kingdom of God will come in the future. That will

happen, they say, when Jesus comes again and God's heavenly kingdom is established.

This interpretation has a dramatic practical impact on their lives and them. Since the kingdom of God has not yet come, they think that they cannot experience it in their life on earth. That in turn makes it practically irrelevant to their lives and them right now.

I once taught Matthew 5:43-48 to a small group of Christians. That passage is the one that teaches us to not hate our enemies but to love them instead. During a discussion time, one of the participants in the group said that no one including Christians can do that in this life on earth. We'll have to wait for heaven to do that, he said. My response was that we won't have any enemies in heaven and so this passage is clearly for life on earth.

My point though is that the young Christian who said that sees the kingdom of God as a future reality that isn't available to us now. Consequently, he doesn't live out and experience the Sermon on the Mount. He doesn't even try to in fact since he thinks it can't be done.

But the Greek word translated "at hand" doesn't mean "will soon come." It means "has come." The verb form of the Greek word indicates a past and completed action. It means "**has come.**"

So, when Jesus said that the kingdom of God is at hand, He meant that it is already in existence. He meant that it is right here all around us and has been since the beginning of human history.

But that isn't all that He meant. He also meant that it is accessible to us. The person and power of God are accessible to us right now.

The implication of that is profound. We can experience the kingdom of God, the person and power of God, right now in our earthly lives. We don't have to wait until Jesus comes again to experience it. Two verses make that perfectly clear.

The first is 1 Corinthians 10:11. This verse contains one of my favorite truths in the Bible. Paul says that the ends of the ages has already come upon us. Ends of the ages means our heavenly life. We can experience something of heaven right now in this life.

The second verse is Hebrews 6:5. Paul says here that disciples can experience right now the powers of the age to come. That means that we can experience something of the powers we will have in heaven right now in this life.

You can see how these verses fit into our Trilogy. The first part of it was about "The Power to Live." Well, we get that power to live by accessing or tapping into the life and powers of heaven. That is just another way of saying "by accessing and tapping into the kingdom of heaven."

Now, just because the kingdom of God is at hand doesn't mean that we automatically access it just because we're Christians.

There was a discouraged new convert who was at the point of discarding his faith. Those who led him to Jesus told that he would now experience the supernatural powers of the Holy Spirit in his life. Since that is all they told him, he just assumed that he would automatically experience this power but he didn't. He found himself still getting angry like he did before, being self-centered like he was before, and so on, which is why he was so discouraged.

You see, the people who led him to Jesus failed to tell him something. Just because the kingdom of God is at hand doesn't mean that we automatically access it just because we're Christians. There is something that we have to do to access it.

Dallas Willard compares it to electricity. Willard lived in southern Missouri when he was a child and no one there had electricity. But then the REA extended electrical lines into the area and electricity was at hand.

Almost everyone took the electricity by hooking up to it. But a few people didn't. They didn't want to change or couldn't afford it and so they didn't take the electricity.

That is the way it is with the kingdom of God. It is at hand and available to everyone. Some take it but most don't. They go right on living their lives as if it weren't at hand. That shows us that it is one thing for the kingdom of God to be at hand and an entirely different thing for us to take it.

So take it! That is our call this evening. Do what most Christians don't do. Take the kingdom of God. Access the powers of the age to come.

Doing that is a two step process once we're saved. The first step is learning how to take it. The second step is then doing what we learn.

That is exactly what parts 1 and 3 of this Discipleship Trilogy are designed to do – help you learn how to access the kingdom of God and then to do what you learn.

But how does part 2, what we're studying now, The Sermon on the Mount, fit into this? The answer is, "IT SHOWS US WHAT KIND OF PERSON THOSE WHO ACCESS THE KINGDOM OF GOD BECOME AND WHAT KIND OF LIFE THEY LIVE." Or as I often say it, the Sermon on the Mount shows us what a kingdom person and a kingdom life look like.

It is absolutely essential that we understand this. The truth is that you and I will only become what we have a vision for becoming. You and I will only live the life that we have a vision for living. The Sermon on the Mount gives us both of these visions that we need.

That is why it is life transforming. I made the decision to master the Sermon on the Mount by carefully studying the text itself and by studying commentaries on it. Doing that has been the most person and life transforming experience that I have ever had.

The principles and truths that we're going to be discussing the next weeks are inherently powerful. I challenge you to open up your mind, heart, and soul to them. You will then be, I pray, as transformed as I have been.

The Beatitudes

5:3-12

As any good sermon does, the Sermon on the Mount has an introduction, in 5:3-12.

This is one of the most well known and beloved passages in the Bible. It is called "the beatitudes." Notice the formula that Jesus uses in it. Nine times He says, "blessed are the so and so's." The word "blessed" here means literally "happy." Happy are the so and so's. That is where the passage gets its name. The word "beatitude" means "happy" or "blessed."

NINE CONDITIONS AND BLESSINGS

Jesus mentions nine conditions and blessings in the beatitudes. Let me first of all state what they are and then we will attempt to interpret them. The list is as follows:

<u>Verse</u>	<u>Condition</u>	<u>Blessing</u>
3	poor in spirit	the kingdom of heaven
4	mourn	comforted
5	the gentle	inherit the earth
6	hunger and thirst for righteousness	satisfied
7	merciful	receive mercy
8	pure in heart	see God
9	peacemakers	called the sons of God
10	persecuted for the sake of righteousness	the kingdom of heaven
11-12	reviled and persecuted for the sake of Jesus	great reward in heaven

TWO POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIONS

These beatitudes give rise to an interpretive issue that determines their meaning. Are these conditions desirable or undesirable? Are people who have these conditions well off or poorly off? Are they fortunate or unfortunate?

The majority view interprets these as desirable, actually necessary, conditions. We must actually be all these things, poor in spirit, sorrowful, gentle, and so on in order to get into the kingdom of God and be good Christians.

Every sermon that I have ever heard preached on the beatitudes interprets them this way. Every book that I have ever read that discusses them, except one, interpret them this way. My Ryrie Study Bible footnote on the beatitudes is an example of this. Ryrie interprets them this way: "THE BEATITUDES DESCRIBE THE INNER QUALITIES OF A FOLLOWER OF CHRIST AND PROMISE HIM BLESSINGS IN THE FUTURE. THEY CONTRAST SHARPLY WITH THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PHARISEES, WHO WERE PROUD, THINKING THEY HAD ALREADY ATTAINED RIGHTEOUSNESS." Most preachers and teachers believe and teach this.

Take the first beatitude for example, poor in spirit. The first view says that this means being humble minded and realizing our need for God. Chuck Colson testifies that he was arrogant and proud and far from the kingdom. But Watergate made him humble minded and realize his need for God, which eventually led to his

becoming a Christian. So poor in spirit is a desirable condition and is the first step in entering into the kingdom of God.

But there is a second view. This minority view interprets the beatitudes to be undesirable conditions. It contends that they show us people who are poorly off not well off, people who are unfortunate not fortunate. People who are all these things, poor in spirit, sorrowful, gentle and so on must overcome them to find blessedness and joy.

So which of these two views is the correct one? The key to determining this of course is the context in which the beatitudes are spoken. By context, I mean two things: the setting in which Jesus preached the sermon and the entire sermon itself with its unified theme. I believe that both of those contexts endorse the minority view. I believe that these are undesirable conditions.

Notice to whom Jesus is preaching in verse 1, "the multitudes." The Pharisees derisively called these masses "the people of the land." They looked down on them and rejected them because they were such undesirable people. If you and I were there when Jesus preached this sermon, we would have been surrounded by the outcasts of society, the dregs of humanity - shabby, grubby, messy, and needy people.

My hometown is Van Wert, Ohio. I lived there in a section of town called "Bucktown" before I moved away. Bucktown was the poorest section in town when I was there and is even worse now than it was then. I walked through my old neighborhood when I was home last month and it had deteriorated badly - not just the buildings but the people as well. I saw infants running around in the yard with nothing but diapers on. I saw men with ponytails and cigarettes hanging out of their mouths fixing old beat up cars in the front yard. I saw women with greasy hair, torn clothing, and tattoos all over them lounging on front porches and so on.

Well, those were the kind of people to whom Jesus was preaching that day. I believe that He looked out over these shabby people and in the beatitudes described what He saw. He articulated the undesirable conditions of the people to whom He was preaching.

THE CONDITIONS DEFINED

Let's examine each of the beatitudes and define what these undesirable conditions are:

1. Verse 3 (the poor in spirit) – those who are spiritually bankrupt and deprived
2. Verse 4 (those who mourn) – those whose hearts have been broken
3. Verse 5 (the gentle) – those who are intimidated and shy
4. Verse 6 (those who hunger and thirst after righteousness) – those who desperately want the wrongs in their lives righted
5. Verse 7 (the merciful) – those who are taken advantage of
6. Verse 8 (the pure in heart) – those for whom nothing is good enough including themselves
7. Verse 9 (the peacemakers) – those who are always caught in the middle of things
8. Verse 10 (those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness) – those whose lives are ruined because they've stood up for what is right
9. Verses 11-12 (those who are reviled and persecuted for the sake of Jesus) – those who are insulted and cast out because they took up with Jesus.

Let me illustrate several of these conditions to help you understand their essential nature.

The poor in spirit means those who are spiritually bankrupt. I think of the women at the Giant Eagle bakery who had no idea what Palm Sunday was or the woman I counseled who had no idea that the Bible contained an Old and New Testament and was divided into verses and chapters or the woman at the jewelry counter who wondered who that little man was on the cross and so on. These people are so spiritually incompetent that they don't even know the most basic things about God and His kingdom. They are poor in spirit.

The gentle means those who are intimidated and shy. When I was in seminary, a lady in our church invited Jill and me to a pots and pan party at her house. The salesman who was there was unlike any other salesman I've ever seen. He just wasn't cut out for it. He was the shyest and most pathetic person I think I've ever met. You could tell he was dying a thousand deaths, that he was horribly embarrassed, trying to explain what these pots and pans were about to the 10 or 12 people who were there. Jill will tell you if you ask here. We've never felt sorrier for a person in our entire lives. That man was the gentle.

You can see then what the beatitudes are. They are the unfortunate conditions of people who are poorly off in one way or the other. They describe hopeless people who don't have much going for them. Brennan Manning wrote a book titled The Ragamuffin Gospel. That word "ragamuffin" does describe well the people that these conditions describe.

THE BLESSINGS DEFINED

Now that we know what the people are like to whom Jesus is preaching, let's define the blessings He tells them they can have. Keep the pattern in mind as we do so. Jesus offers a specific blessing for each condition. The blessings are as follows:

1. Verse 3 (the poor in spirit will have the kingdom of heaven) – they will access the presence and powers of God.
2. Verse 4 (those who mourn will be comforted) – God will give them laughter and peace in the midst of their tears.
3. Verse 5 (the gentle will inherit the earth) – they will not stand up for themselves but God will and will supply what they need
4. Verse 6 (those who hunger and thirst after righteousness will be satisfied) – God will either right the wrongs in their lives or make them content with not being righted
5. Verse 7 (the merciful will receive mercy) – they are taken advantage of but God will work out what is done for their good
6. Verse 8 (the pure in heart will see God) – they will find someone who is good enough to satisfy them and who will accept them for the way they are, God
7. Verse 9 (the peacemakers will be called the sons of God) – the ungrateful and wicked whom they are in between will see God in the way that they act and respond
8. Verse 10 (those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness will have the kingdom of heaven) – they lives may be ruined because they stood up for what is right but they will be and feel secure in God
9. Verses 11-12 (those who are reviled and persecuted for the sake of Jesus will have a great reward in heaven) – they are cast out by others on earth but will be greatly received by God in heaven

Let me illustrate several of these blessings to help you understand their essential nature.

Those who mourn shall be comforted. Listen to the words of a mother whose co-ed daughter was raped and beaten to death: "IN HIS PRESENCE I HAVE FOUND PEACE AND JOY FOR ME AND GRACE FOR MY DAUGHTER'S KILLER." God truly did comfort her.

Those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, who have been wronged and want it righted, will be satisfied. I think of Corrie ten Boom meeting that Nazi prison camp guard who treated her sister and her so horribly. Corrie reached out in love and embraced him. God truly did satisfy her.

THE MESSAGE OF THE BEATITUDES

Having defined the conditions and blessings of the beatitudes together, we now what Jesus is trying to say. No one is beyond beatitude. Do you believe that? No one is beyond being blessed by the kingdom of God.

Those who believe in Jesus and count on Him will be transformed – and so will their lives. They will become the kind of person and live the kind of life that Jesus goes on to describe in the rest of His sermon. They will become the beautiful person and live the beautiful life that He describes. They will enter into the deepest levels of well being and joy that are possible on earth.

This is true no matter how shabby and grubby people are. The humanity and life of God's kingdom is available to everyone no matter how good or bad their condition or state. Human lasts can become divine firsts if they give their hearts and lives to Jesus.

Let's stop for a moment and identify those that our culture thinks are human lasts. This is easy to do if we're perceptive and aware of what is done and said around us – in movies, on television shows, on billboards, in magazines, in advertisements, in commercials, and so on. Teenagers, for instance, think that someone who isn't intensely popular or at least in the right group is an unfortunate human being. Adults think anyone who isn't attractive or in shape or successful or thin or relentlessly engaged in romance is unfortunate.

Then there are those who really are unfortunate: the incurably ill, the paralyzed, the bankrupt, the barren, the overemployed, the underemployed, the unemployed, the lonely, the swindled, the divorced, the abused, the adulterous, and more. I think of all the people, for instance, who have come into my office at the breaking point – because of their jobs.

The message of the beatitudes is that all these people can be blessed. They can become the kind of person and live the kind of life that Jesus describes in His sermon. There is no one who is beyond well being and joy.

When I was a junior at Malone College, I became friends with a 35 year-old ex con named Dan. Dan had been convicted of grand theft and spent 5 years at the Ohio State Penitentiary. He was a mean and ornery young man when he was convicted but everything changed at the penitentiary. On the very first night he was there, he knelt down on the floor and gave himself to Jesus. Jesus then changed this human last into a divine first. He got out, went to Malone and is today the pastor of a Baptist church. He is a happy and blessed man.

What happened to Him can happen to anyone, no matter how shabby, who become disciples of Jesus, who do the things that we discussed in the first part of our trilogy and will discuss in the third part. That is the message of the beatitudes. That is how Jesus introduces His Sermon on the Mount. Even ragamuffins can become kingdom people who live kingdom lives.

The People Who Make the World Work

5:13-16

Having told the masses in verses 3-13 that they can be blessed, Jesus then tells them in verses 13-16 what will happen if they are – they will make the world work. These verses contain two of the most celebrated metaphors in the Bible.

The first is found in verse 13. People who are blessed by Jesus are the salt of the earth. The ancient world highly valued salt. The Greeks in fact called it "theion" which means divine. The Romans had a little jingle that goes like this in Latin: "THERE IS NOTHING MORE USEFUL THAN SUN AND SALT."

People in Jesus' day connected salt with three qualities. First, it was pure. The Romans said that salt was the purest of all things because it came from the purest of all things, the sun and the sea. Second, it was preserving. Salt was the most common preservative in the ancient world, the one thing more than any other that kept things from rotting, decaying, and going bad. Third, it was flavoring. The ancient world used salt to make food come alive with taste.

With that in mind, notice what Jesus says here. He tells the little people to whom He is speaking and us, most of whom are little people, that we can be the salt of the earth. If we become kingdom people living kingdom lives, the kind of life described in chapters 5-7, then we will be the salt of the earth. We will purify, preserve, and flavor the world we live in.

The second metaphor is found in verse 14. You are the light of the world. The people who heard these words understood what Jesus was trying to say. Remember that there were no electrical or gas lights and we can only imagine how dark a world it was. Ancient peoples highly valued light as a result.

That explains why they often used it metaphorically. The Jews called Jerusalem, for instance, "a light to the Gentiles." They called one famous rabbi "a lamp of Israel."

You can see what the word "light" came to symbolize – guidance. To be a light was to be a guide. Jesus is saying then that those who become kingdom people are lights or guides to the world.

That raises the question of course, "what do these metaphors mean as a practical matter?" What is Jesus trying to tell us? It's this. It is kingdom people living kingdom lives that make the world work. When I say "work" I mean "function well," that is, as it is supposed to function.

DECENT PEOPLE DOING SMALL EVILS

I would point out to you in that regard that the world in general and America in particular are not working. Focusing on America, it is not functioning as it is supposed to. I want you to listen carefully to what social commentator Charles Murray said about our society. He commented that "America is stumbling toward dystopia." Dystopia is the opposite of utopia. It is a state in which the conditions and quality of life are dreadful. America is stumbling toward that state, Murray says. We are a disintegrating culture rife with crime, drugs, alcohol, bankruptcy, abuse, educational failure, corrupt politics, and more.

Let me ask you a question. What is the cause of this dystopia?

Most people would answer that the cause of it is bad people doing great evils. We think of drug dealers, pimps, fornicators, adulterers, crooked politicians and so on.

But that isn't really the cause of dystopia. I commented on this issue a few months ago in a sermon. The ultimate cause of dystopia isn't bad people doing great evils; it's decent people doing small evils.

Remember what I said in that sermon. The great evils that bad people do is supported by the readiness of decent people to do small evils when the conditions are right. The persistence of the great evils that bad people do rest on the persistence of the small evils that decent people do. Without those small evils, the greater evils could not exist or at least could not exist the way that they do.

A Christian who was burglarized in Canton told me he reported more property stolen than was really stolen to pad his claim. His rationale was that he had been paying premiums for years and had never made any claims. It was only fair he thought. You see what I mean in this example. The conditions were right, he could get away with theft and rationalize it, and so he did it. Multiply that kind of little dishonesty millions of times over each week and you can imagine the impact it begins to make.

That then is why America and the world aren't working. It is because of the readiness of decent people to do small evils when it's to their advantage to do so and they can rationalize it.

KINGDOM PEOPLE BEING SALT AND LIGHT

While American society in general is not working, there are certain parts of it that are. Stop for a few minutes and think about some of the contexts that make up our culture: city halls, schools, charitable organizations, social organizations, performing arts centers, churches, families, and on it goes.

Kingdom people living kingdom lives are salt and light to all of those contexts. That simply means that they make those contexts work. They make them function the way that they are supposed to.

Jesus reveals the dynamics of this in verses 15 and 16. A person lights a lamp in order to shed its brilliance on everyone in the house. In the same way, God gives kingdom people a certain radiance that sheds its brilliance on all those who are around them.

This radiance is so discernible that it is obvious to everyone just like the lights of a city are. Imagine trying to hide the lights of Las Vegas. Just as those lights cannot be hidden so can that which radiates from kingdom people not be hidden.

The radiance that I'm talking here is goodness. Something flows out of the very being of kingdom people and that something is goodness. If you are around a kingdom person long enough, you can't help but feel and sense the goodness coming out of them.

Verse 16 shows us the impact of this kingdom goodness on the people who are around it. They glorify the father who is in heaven. This suggests the transforming impact of the goodness, which flows from kingdom people. Oswald Chambers articulated this so well in one of his teachings. He said that unless a person is highly dysfunctional, he or she can't help but be made better by the goodness of kingdom people.

I would explain it this way. Kingdom people and the lives they live are a form of counseling to others. That means two things.

First, like light, they guide people. That is what counseling is about. It is about helping people figure out what they should be and how they should live their lives. Kingdom people and the lives they live do just that. Their character and lifestyles show others, by example, what to be and how to live.

I was around my mother, for example, for 45 years and what she was and how she lived guided me. I learned mental toughness, perseverance without whining and utter confidence and trust in God from her.

I think Paul captured the very spirit of this in 1 Corinthians 4:16. He commands, "THEREFORE I EXHORT YOU, BE IMITATORS OF ME." Both Paul's being and His behavior were models for others to follow. That is the way it is with kingdom people living kingdom lives. They are models for others to follow.

That kingdom people living kingdom lives are a form of counseling to others means a second thing. The first is that like light they guide. The second thing is that like salt livens food, they liven people.

Counseling isn't just guidance; it's therapy as well. It should enliven and renew the counselee.

Kingdom people living kingdom lives are just that – therapeutic. They are to people what salt is to food – flavoring. They enliven the people around them.

So much goodness is coming out of them and their lives that we can feel it. “There’s just something about them,” we say. We may not know what it is but we do know that it is good and we like it. It is actually therapeutic being around them.

The classic example of this is one that I have shared with you before – Mother Teresa. I once talked with a heart surgeon who worked with her for over a year. He told me that he felt the peace and joy of her presence so strongly that he actually felt like crying when she left the room.

You can see from what I’ve said that it is kingdom people living kingdom lives that makes the world work. It is they who make city halls, school, social organizations, families, workplaces, and so on function like they are supposed to. Without these people, believe me, the world would be a lot less functional than it is.

So that is the message of Jesus in verses 13-16. Having told the little people to whom He was speaking that they could become kingdom people, He then tells them in verses 13-16 that it is they as kingdom people, not the big people, not the brightest and best, that make the world work, that make life manageable.

This is a message we so desperately need to hear. Just yesterday, I heard one of our leaders say that our denomination is looking to train the brightest and best of our young people for service. I don’t agree with that approach, which is the world’s approach in my book. I believe that we ought to be looking for not the brightest and best young people and adults to do God’s work but the ones, even if they aren’t bright or the best, who have kingdom minds and hearts or at least are trying to. This is consistent with verses 13-16.

Keeping the Law

5:17-19

5:17-20 flows from what Jesus has said before and follows logically from it. To understand these verses, we must understand the impact that the words of Jesus in those previous verses had on his audience.

Remember that it was a class-conscious society in which Jesus lived. The self-righteous Pharisees were at the top of it and the ragamuffins to whom Jesus was speaking here were at the bottom of it. The Pharisees degraded them and taught them that they weren't useful to either God or the world.

But then this man comes along and tells them that if they repent, they will be blessed. He tells them that they, human lasts, will become divine firsts - that they will be the ones who will glorify the Father and make the world work.

Imagine if you can how absolutely astonished these people must have been. In verses 3-16, Jesus had turned everything that they thought about themselves and the Pharisees upside down - and they must have been flabbergasted.

But there was a danger in that. It was the danger of misunderstanding what that meant about the law and the prophets.

Notice in my translation at least that the first letter of the words "Law" and "Prophets" is capitalized. That's because these were technical terms in the 1st century Jewish world that together stood for the Old Testament. 1st century Jews had the very same Old Testament that we have, the very same 66 books.

Now, the Pharisees were masters of the Old Testament. They spent their entire lives studying and knowing it. These crowds in contrast only knew about the Old Testament what the Pharisees taught them.

And what the Pharisees taught them was this. The Old Testament law puts people at the top of the social ladder in possession of God. God favors people who are rich, educated, powerful, and popular and disfavors those who aren't. You can see here what the Pharisees did. They developed a legalism based on the Old Testament that kept them in their privileged place and the crowds in their lowly place.

But now Jesus upsets this whole order of things and in so doing confuses the crowds. They could easily have concluded from what He said that He was throwing out the whole Old Testament law in the process.

So He affirms in these verses that He isn't abolishing the Old Testament law but affirming it. Rightly understood, it didn't

create this pecking order that they were used to. It was the Pharisees' perversion of it that did that.

Verse 19 makes perfectly clear that God's law, in the Old Testament and for us the New Testament as well, is good and right. We must understand this. God's law is good and right.

I'd explain it this way. One of the greatest needs that human beings have always had is the need to know how to live. Plato's classic work Republic in the 5th century BC was one of the earliest and best expressions of this. But the need to know how to live is more desperate today than it's ever been – in New York, London, Paris, Rome, Berlin, and yes even Youngstown, Ohio.

A couple of months ago, Larry King had give spiritual leaders on his show: a conservative Christian (John MacArthur), a new age guru (Depak Chopra), a liberal Catholic priest (Michael Manning), a Jewish rabbi, and a Muslim. Larry took questions from callers of course one of whom from Japan asked this and I quote him: "ISN'T IT TRUE THAT THE RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD ARE FAILING MANKIND AND NOT FREEING US FROM OUR NATURE OF ANGER, HATRED, AND MURDER?" That was a profound question. Inherent in it and the entire show itself was how desperate the need to know how to live really is.

But there is a solution to that need. That solution is God's law. God's law, His commandments in the Bible, tell us how to live life and to live it well.

There's a reason for that and we must grasp this as Christians. It's because God's law isn't just do's and don'ts. It's actually a picture of reality.

Remember the example of this that I used in a sermon one time – Deuteronomy 23:12-14. This is a fascinating if less than delicate passage. The word "camp" here refers to the living area of the Israelites. Notice what God commands them to do in that regard. They must remove everything that is "indecent" from it. The word "indecent" in verse 14 means both their sewage and their garbage. Knowing nothing about microorganisms, about germs, ancient peoples especially city dwellers used their streets and properties as depositories of sewage and garbage. But God commanded the Israelites here to not do that, to take their sewage and garbage outside the camp and bury it instead.

Now, here is what I want you to see and this is a million-dollar insight for those who have ears to hear. This command in verses 12-14 is a picture of reality. It reveals how things are microbiologically in our world. The reality is that there are microorganisms in the world out there that can kill us or make us sick and this commandment is a reflection of that reality.

Which in turn makes keeping it the best thing for us. It make keeping it something that leads to well being and joy.

That explains why the Jewish ghettos and neighborhoods in the cities of Europe were relatively untouched by the Bubonic plague. The Bubonic plague killed 25 million people in Europe, over 33% of the population, from 1347 to 1351. But Jewish ghettos and neighborhoods were ravaged by it. That's because they obeyed this commandment in verses 12-14, which kept the rats which carried the fleas which carried the Bubonic plague from infesting their living areas.

That illustrates one of the most important truths that you will ever learn. God's law is much more than do's and don'ts. It is actually a picture of reality. It reveals how things really are with God, His universe, and human existence. This commandment in verses 12-14, for instance, is a reflection of the way things are microbiologically. In the same way, God's other commandments are a reflection of the way things are spiritually, psychologically, relationally, and/or materially.

Another example of this is God's command to not have intercourse before marriage. This command is a reflection of the way things are microbiologically and psychologically. First, microbiologically there are organisms in the world out there that are spread through illicit pre-marital sex. The epidemic in our culture of socially transmitted diseases is testimony to this. Second, as the Bible teaches, it is impossible to touch a person's body without touching their soul. Sex always affects a person's feelings and soul. Thus, there is no such thing as casual sex. God's command to not have pre-marital intercourse reveals the way things are microbiologically and psychologically in the world.

What I've just shared is truly one of the most significant insights that you will ever learn. God's law isn't just about Him being offended although it is about that. It is also about what is good. The law is good. It is right for human beings and human life. It is how the kingdom of God works. This is the message that we must passionately teach believers and unbelievers alike.

Transition

5:20

Verse 20 is a transition verse. Remember that this is a unified sermon with a specific theme. Verses 3-19 were the whole introduction to it. In verses 3-12, Jesus told the shabby people he was speaking to that they could be blessed. He went on to tell them in verse 13-16 that they, human lasts, could become divine firsts, the kind of people who glorify God and make the world work. He then cautioned them in verses 17-19 to not misunderstand what that means. It doesn't mean that He is abolishing the law because the law is the course of rightness. It is how God's kingdom works, how those in it are to live.

That brings us to verse 20 which is a transition from the introduction to the heart of the sermon – what a kingdom person and life looks like. In this verse, Jesus makes clear that God's law may be the course of rightness but it isn't the source of rightness.

He does that by contrasting two things. He contrasts the righteousness of the Pharisees with the righteousness of God's kingdom. Verse 20 really is a lynchpin of this sermon and must be understood to understand it.

The Pharisees focused on the actions that they thought the law required to be done. Righteousness to them was doing those actions in their lives. Their primary concern was to do those actions and to make sure everyone knew that they did.

The problem of course was that they didn't have the condition of heart necessary to do the actions the law really requires. So they defined what those actions were in a superficial way that they could live out. They watered down the law in other words so that they could keep it. This watered down law was what Jesus means when He talks about the righteousness of the Pharisees.

I would compare it to tithing today. I've discussed this in detail with you before. The American church today teaches tithing because that is an action that American Christians are willing to live with. They are not willing to live with what the Bible actually teaches - massive economic sharing or what is being called now "radical giving." So tithing in my view would be analogous to the righteousness of the Pharisees.

In contrast, the righteousness of God's kingdom is the actions that the law really requires. Take how we are to treat our enemies. The Pharisees taught that the law commands us to love our neighbors but hate our enemies. But that isn't what the law really teaches. Exodus 23:4-5, Proverbs 20:22; 24:17-18; 25:21-22, for instance, teach us to not retaliate against our enemies but to do good things for them instead. The righteousness of the kingdom is what the law really teaches.

The problem is that human beings in their natural condition cannot do what the law teaches no matter how hard they try. So many people, even the spiritually naïve, understand this. I once talked with a very new Christian about loving our enemies and doing good to them. He commented to me that He doesn't really give those things much thought because there isn't anyone who can do them anyway.

The issue that young man was addressing is a critical one. Can anyone actually keep the law as it really is? Not as the Pharisees taught it, but as it really is. One thing is for sure. We cannot keep the law by trying to keep the law.

We must aim at something else, which is becoming the kind of person who just naturally keeps it. Jeremiah 31:33 is one of the truly striking verses in the Bible. God promises that there will be a day when He will put His law on the heart of his people.

Let me use an analogy to explain what that means. Suppose that I step into a swimming pool. I will certainly get wet if I do. In the same way, this verses is saying, there will come a day when God's people will follow His law as regularly as those who step into a pool get wet. Them not following His law would be as surprising as someone stepping into a pool and not getting wet.

When will this happen that God will write His law on the hearts of His people. Hebrews 8:10 and 10:16 show us that it can be now as the Holy Spirit transforms us into the image and likeness of Jesus. As you and I do the things that we have learned in Part 1 of this trilogy and will learn in Part 3, the Holy Spirit will write the law on our heart. That means that He will make us Christlike so that we just naturally and automatically do it.

Which is what the rest of Jesus' sermon is about. In it, Jesus compares the righteousness of the Pharisees with the righteousness of those who have the law of God on their heart.

He mentions six different contexts. In each one, He explains what the Pharisees would do. He then explains what kingdom people, those who have the law of God on their heart, those who are like Jesus inside, would do.

Let's take a look at each one of those six contexts and contrast the righteousness of the Pharisees with the righteousness of kingdom people.

We must do this because it gives us a vision of the kind of person we want to become and the kind of life that we want to live. This vision is a critical thing because we will never attain in our person or life what we do not aspire to. Aspiring to be and do what the Sermon on the Mount teaches prepares us for Part 3 of our trilogy.

Anger **5:21-22**

The first context that Jesus mentions is found in verses 21 and 22. Suppose you were conducting a seminar on what it means to be a kingdom person and live a kingdom life. What would be the first subject that you discuss? Verses 21 and 22 show us the first subject that Jesus discusses – anger.

Do you understand the significance of that. Do you understand what that implies. Listen carefully to this. The first step toward becoming a kingdom person is eliminating anger from our lives.

The Pharisees obviously didn't believe it. In verse 21, Jesus reveals what their standard of behavior was. You are righteous, they said, if you don't murder anyone.

Let me ask you two questions. First, how many of you have ever purposely killed someone for your own gain? No one! Second, how many of you have ever gotten angry with someone? Everyone!

Those two questions and the answers to them teach us that murder is not an issue in the lives of most people, which is why the Pharisees defined righteousness in terms of it. But anger certainly is. It is the most pressing of all issues in fact. The very first step toward becoming a kingdom person is eliminating it from our lives.

WHAT ANGER IS

To do that, we must first of all understand what anger is. In its simplest form, it is an initial spontaneous response that comes from the deepest part of the personality. It is a feeling that seizes our body and immediately impels it to act.

The purpose of this simple anger is to alert us to either an injustice or the obstruction of our will. It makes us aware that someone is doing something that is wrong or that they are interfering with what we want or don't want or what someone else wants or doesn't want.

Willard uses a good analogy to explain this. He says that this simple anger is like pain. Pain is an initial response that alerts us to danger. It tells us that our finger is on a hot surface and is going to be burned if we don't take it away. Simple anger is just like that. It is an initial spontaneous response that alerts us to an injustice or the obstruction of our will. It immediately raises resistance or alarm, even before we've had time to think about it, and then quickly passes.

You experience this kind of anger a lot as an umpire. I umpired in a church softball league one summer and made calls that players disagreed with. Many would often react with this simple anger and say things like "that was outside ump" or "I beat the throw." That was all they did and dropped it. I understood that simple anger as a normal part of the game and wasn't upset by it.

I believe this is the kind of anger that Paul is talking about in Ephesians 4:26-27. In the previous verses, 17-24, Paul discusses laying aside the old self and putting on the new self, which is transformed, and in the image of God. He then rehearses a litany of things that will be true of anyone who does this. One of those things is verse 26. We will get angry and not sin. The sun will not go down on our anger. These phrases are Paul's way of describing simple anger that passes as quickly as it rises.

Let me ask you. Is this kind of anger a sin for which we need to repent? Apparently not! Ephesians 4:26-27 clearly implies that. As an initial spontaneous response, it isn't wrong. That is true but I believe it is also true that it isn't the best thing either. You might compare it to toothaches. They aren't sinful but who needs them. In the same way, simple anger isn't wrong but we don't need it. We can be initially angry and not sin but in my opinion it's better to not be angry at all.

But the kind of anger that Jesus prohibits in verse 22, the kind that is the reality among us, is much more than this. It blazes up and continues to stay. It doesn't quickly pass but holds on to affect not only us but the people around us. The life span of simple anger is just a few seconds. Anything beyond that is the anger of verse 22.

Let's go back to umpiring again. Most of you remember the infamous Roberto Alomar-John Hirshbeck affair back in 1996. It was on all the news. It was an outside pitch that Hirshbeck called strike three. Alomar became immediately angry as almost anyone in his shoes would be. It was a crucial situation in the playoffs with runners on base in a close game and Alomar wanted to get a base hit, which he now couldn't. And besides, it did seem like a bad pitch. Alomar's will was thwarted and he got mad. There wasn't anything wrong with that.

But his anger didn't quickly pass. It held on and began escalating. At first, he argued with Hirshbeck, then screamed at him, and then finally spit in his face, which is what got him thrown out of the game and suspended.

That is the kind of anger that Jesus is talking about in verse 22. Alomar violated these verses the moment he argued with Hirshbeck and before the screaming and spitting began. His anger flared up and held on and took on a life of its own in him.

This second kind of anger is the kind of anger that we observe and see in others and ourselves. It is the kind of anger that is a reality among us in our homes, workplaces, churches, ball fields, schools, legislative halls, cars, and more.

WHY WE GET ANGRY

But why is it the reality among us. Why do we get angry like we do? The answer is "because we choose to." It really is as simple as that. As Willard points out, anger is primarily a function of the human will. I would point out that is not true of simple anger as I defined it. But it is true of this anger that holds on. At first, it rises spontaneously apart from our will. But we can then receive and decide to indulge it, which we usually do. We will to be angry.

There is a reason that we will that. Most anger has an element of self-righteousness and pride in it. The truth is that it is almost always a wounded ego that makes us decide to be angry.

We normally do two things that make us will to be angry. First, we blow the wound done to us out of proportion. We view that wound or hurt as being bigger than it really is. We see ourselves as being horribly mistreated. Second, we blow the self out of proportion. We view the self as being more important than it really is. How dare they wrong those I care about or me. Seeing the wound and ourselves that way, we then decide to indulge our anger instead of wave it off.

I know this is true because I've experienced it. I once got mad at a mechanic that I believed cheated me out of \$50. \$50 was a lot of money to me at the time but that isn't how I was thinking. I blew the wound out of proportion. I was feeling and acting not like it was a lot of money to me but like it was financially ruining me, which it wasn't.

I think you get the point. Anger is primarily a function of the human will. We get mad because we choose to. And we choose to because we've made the self more important and the wound done to it bigger than they really are.

THE RESULTS OF ANGER

But there is something that we need to know when we choose to be angry. There is hell to pay when we do. That was the title of a book about Hillary Clinton, Hell to Pay. I don't know what that book is about but that would well be the title of a book about anger. I'm not trying to be vulgar or cute when I say that. I'm just repeating what Paul says in Ephesians 4:27.

This is a revealing verse. Paul says that when we indulge the anger we feel, it gives the devil an opportunity, or as one version translates it, it gives the devil a chance. That means it opens up our personalities and circumstances to him and his work. It gives the devil a chance, and believe me, he'll take it. There will then be hell to pay and I mean that literally. Anger unleashed the forces and dynamics of hell into our lives and us. There isn't anything more destructive than it is.

For one thing, anger in its own right, not acted out, is an injury to others. If I discover that you're mad at me, I'm already wounded. You don't have to do or say anything. Your anger affects what I am and do. It affects how I feel about myself and act. Just reflect on the times when someone told you that a parent or spouse was mad at you. You were wounded by that even before you saw them and they said or did anything.

You can see then that anger in its own right, not even acted out, is an injury to others. But that isn't usually the case is it? The case usually is that anger is acted out in destructive ways.

You can see that in Matthew 5:21-22. Notice what the judgment is for murder in verse 21. The murderer shall be liable or guilty before the court. Now notice what the judgment for getting angry is in verse 22. The angry person shall be liable or guilty before the court. That is a startling statement. Jesus applies the same judgment to anger that he does to murder. The judgments for anger and murder are the same.

Jesus shows us here that anger and murder are linked. That's because it is anger that causes murder. Almost all murders and physical assaults begin as anger in the human heart. Talk to any policeman and he will tell you what the most dangerous calls are, the ones that he dislikes the most – domestic disturbances. Why? Because those disturbances always involve deep rooted anger, which usually results in assault or even murder. Then there are the 1000 murders and 1,000,000 assaults in the workplace each year. You've read and heard about the murders especially. The murderers are almost always a disgruntled or fired employee who is angry with his co-workers or boss. Most psychologists and sociologists agree. Eliminate the anger in those situations and almost no one would have been injured or killed.

But there is a larger lesson here in verses 21 and 22. That lesson is that anger is almost always acted out. Rarely is it not. It compels people to say and do destructive things and they almost always do them. They kill, hit, yell, slander, argue, blow their horns, leave the room, give the cold shoulder, and more.

You can see then why there is hell to pay when we get angry. First, anger in its own right, not acted out, wounds others and second, it is usually acted out. But there's a third reason that there is hell to pay.

That reason is that anger feeds on anger. Our anger always wounds others, which usually makes them angry in return. Their anger feeds and increases our anger, which feeds and increases their anger and on it goes. The result is stress levels that you wouldn't believe. This explains why just one angry person in a group usually leads to most of the group being angry.

When everything is said and done, anger wounds three groups. First, it wounds us. Second, it wounds the person we're mad at. And third, it wounds others second hand. Anger wounds others second hand just as our culture says that smoke does. There really is hell to pay when people get angry.

HOW TO ELIMINATE ANGER

So, eliminate anger from your personality and life. But I can't help myself, we say. Oh, yes we can! Notice what Paul writes in Ephesians 5:31: "LET ALL WRATH AND ANGER BE PUT AWAY FROM YOU." And Colossians 3:8, "BUT NOW YOU ALSO, PUT THEM ALL ASIDE: ANGER, WRATH, MALICE, SLANDER AND ABUSIVE SPEECH." Remember what I said earlier. Anger is a choice we make. So we simply choose not to be angry. We don't indulge the initial simple anger we feel but wave it off. We discard it as quickly as it comes. That is what these verses command.

But how do we do that, especially if our anger is habitual and deeply seeded? We do that by believing and doing certain things.

First, believe that anger is sin. In my opinion, this is where not getting angry begins.

So many Christians justify their anger. They rationalize by intertwining their sense of justice with it and calling righteous indignation. I knew a Christian who managed a bookstore. He admitted that he got angry with his employees and yelled at them. But he argues that it's all right that he does. After all, they deserve it, he said, just like the moneylenders that Jesus drove from the temple. So many Christians use that passage to justify their anger. Jesus got mad, they say, and drove the moneylenders from the temple and in similar situations so can we.

I don't think so. My reply to that is this. Yes, it's true. Jesus did drive the moneylenders from the temple. But it isn't true that He was angry when He did it. All four gospels contain this narrative – Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-18; Luke 19:45-47; and John 2:13-16. None of those passages say that He was angry. John does say that He had zeal for the house of God but zeal or passion and anger are two different things. We just assume He was angry because we would have been.

The appeal to righteous indignation is a cop out. So let's not resort to it. We must believe that anger is always sinful, wrong.

I once counseled a Christian husband who was constantly getting angry with his wife. Knowing what I'm teaching you tonight, I asked him out right, "DO YOU BELIEVE THAT GETTING ANGRY WITH YOUR WIFE IS A SIN?" To which he replied, "NO, ACTUALLY I THINK IT'S NECESSARY TO GET HER TO DO WHAT SHE NEEDS TO DO." My heart sank because I had spent many hours years before addressing the issue of anger with this man. I thought that he believed better than that but he doesn't. And because he doesn't, he'll continue to get angry with his wife.

We do need to recognize what I've said many times before. We are not in control of our beliefs. We can't choose to believe but we can choose to understand. Belief then comes as God's gift to us for understanding. To believe that anger is sin, you must study and come to understand all that you can about it.

There's a second thing we must do to eliminate anger from our lives. Keep things in perspective. Remember that anger almost always blows out of proportion the self or the wrong done to it. This is just a natural human phenomenon. In moments of crisis, our first inclination is almost always to exaggerate the tragic or negative element of our situation. So, think and keep yourself and the wound done to you in perspective.

First, keep the self in perspective. Remember that we get angry when people thwart our will. When they do, think that we are not more important than they are. That what they will is just as important as what we will. If what they will is morally wrong, I will not get angry but I will oppose it. But otherwise, their will is just as important as mine.

Second, keep the wound done to us in perspective. Think about what it will really matter in the long run if my will in this situation is not done. It usually isn't a big deal but even if it is a big deal, the bigger deal is pleasing God by not getting angry but loving instead. The truth is that very few wounds are worth getting all hot and bothered about. Certainly none are worth getting angry and sinning about.

I will point out once again that keeping things in perspective can sometimes not be done in the heat of the moment. We may be so overwhelmed by anger that we aren't thinking, just reacting.

The time to get perspective then is after the anger has passed. Once it has passed and you're thinking calmly again, actually take time to reflect back on what happened and what your response was. Think about the things I just talked about thinking about. The truth is that we should reflect every time that we get angry and examine why we did. We should examine how we exaggerated the importance of our self and the wound done to us.

This post anger reflection has been a primary strategy of mine down through the years and I've found that it works. This is what I've discovered. Doing this trains the mind so that we eventually find ourselves actually able to think during the moment of crisis. We find ourselves thinking about the self and the wound done to us after our anger has flared up but before we've indulged it. We're then able to choose not to indulge it.

The third thing we need to do to eliminate anger is to choose to not indulge it. Remember that anger is a matter of the will. That in the end, we get angry because we choose to.

This third step flows from the first two. If I believe anger isn't a sin, I **won't** choose to not indulge it. Or if my mind isn't trained enough to overcome the heat of the anger, I **can't** choose to not indulge it. But if I believe that anger is a sin and my mind is trained, I can and will choose to indulge it. I will simply choose to waive it off and let it go instead.

A couple of months ago, I got a telemarketing call at 9:45 in the evening. When I realized it was a telemarketer, my anger flashed. The moment it did, all three of the things that I've just discussed came into play. First, I truly believe that indulging anger is a sin. Second, I've trained my mind in conjunction with the Holy Spirit so that I almost instinctively thought about the self and the wound done to it, which was really none at all. "So what," I thought, "The call interrupted me for 15 seconds, which isn't any big deal and besides I'm not much of a Christian if I can't forgive such a small rudeness." That's what I thought. So my anger flashed but I chose to not indulge it. The result was that it left as quickly as it came and I politely told the telemarketer I wasn't interested.

A fourth thing that we can do to eliminate anger is to lovingly address the circumstances that are the subject of our anger. Remember, we're usually angry because someone has thwarted our will. They're doing or saying something that works against what we desire or will.

Most people do one of two things. They either harbor anger and don't address the circumstances that caused it or they address those circumstances heatedly and often irrationally.

Don't harbor anger but talk with the person about what he or she is doing that is obstructing our will. Try to get informed by finding out why they're obstructing it. If there is a good reason for it, lovingly let them do it. Even if there isn't a good reason, be willing to yield preferences, rights, and opinions for the sake of peace.

A Christian I know has a gigantic tree that is right on the property line with his neighbor. A huge branch fell off the tree onto the neighbor's side of the yard. The Christian assumed that the neighbor would deal with it since it was on his side but he didn't. The Christian came home from work one day and found it drug unto his property instead. His anger flashed but he knew what I'm teaching you tonight. He didn't harbor the anger but talked with his neighbor about the circumstances that gave rise to it. He asked him what was going on with the branch. To which the neighbor replied, "THE TREE IS ON YOUR PROPERTY AND SO THIS BRANCH IS YOUR PROBLEM NOT MINE." You can see that the neighbor's reason wasn't a very good one but the Christian, being a Christian, yielded his right for the sake of peace. He just cut it up and disposed of it himself. That is the way of Jesus.

There is a fifth thing we can do to eliminate anger. Believe that anything that can be done with anger can be better done without it. In the very beginning stages of a situation that might lead to anger, keep in mind that it's to our benefit and in our own best interests to not get mad. Once all the smoke has settled and the dust has cleared, we will be better off that we didn't get mad.

This is a crucial belief that knocks any rationale for anger out from under its feet. What can be done with anger can always be better done without it.

Once again, though, we can't just choose to believe this. We have to understand and the way to understand is to reflect. I've found this to be one of the most helpful of all exercises in dealing with my anger. One of the things I've done for years when I've indulged my anger is to reflect back on the value of doing so. I've always found that I've been worse off because I did. I've always regretted that I do so in fact. Not once have I ever indulged anger and later on been glad that I had. I've always wished I hadn't and there are no exceptions to this.

About eight years ago, I got mad at my then brother-in-law whom I believed had taken advantage of my mother. I told him in no uncertain terms not only what I thought about what he had done to my mother but what I thought about him. What I said to him was the truth but I shouldn't have said some of it and I shouldn't have said any of it the way I did. Even though he isn't my brother-in-law anymore, I still regret to this day getting mad at him. I wish I could get in a time machine, receive his phone call that night again, and speak to him without anger. I would have been a lot better off if I did and so would he. I think about that very thing in fact when I get into situations that might make me angry or upset.

The sixth and most important thing we can do to eliminate anger is this. Live an overall kind of life between the moments of crisis that discipline us to godliness. We discussed this at length in the first part of our trilogy and so I'm not going to say much about it now. Practice spiritual disciplines that will enable the Holy Spirit to transform you when it comes to anger. I've discussed a couple of those tonight, post-anger reflection being one of those. Between the moments of crisis, work on becoming like Jesus so that you will have the kind of nature that doesn't get angry.

Contempt **5:22b**

But as bad as anger is, there is something even worse – contempt. That is what 22b is about.

Jesus mentions a person saying to another person "Raca." In the days of Jesus, people frequently used the Aramaic word "raca" to express their contempt for someone or to designate someone as contemptible. In his commentary on Matthew, William Barclay explains the basic thrust of this word well. He writes: "IT IS THE WORD OF ONE WHO DESPISES ANOTHER WITH AN ARROGANT CONTEMPT."

Notice how my NASB translated the word, "you good for nothing." That really does capture the essence of its meaning. It is an attitude or belief that a person or persons aren't worth even considering. It's an attitude or belief that a person or persons don't have enough value to even think about what we do or say to them.

Verse 22 shows us what contempt's favorite action is speech. The word "raca" has its own modern day equivalents. Remember what Archie Bunker called Edith in the hit series *All in the Family*. It is still a classic term. He called her "dingbat." He wasn't necessarily angry with her but just considered her opinion or input worthless.

There are other terms we use that express contempt. One of the terms I used when I was younger and didn't know any better was "dipstick." I'd say someone was a dipstick and Jill would get all upset about it. I now know why. A dipstick is meant to convey the idea of worthlessness, which is contempt.

Willard makes an astute observation in that regard. Cultural observers have noted a sharp rise in the use of filthy language in our culture, especially among young people. These observers have condemned it but only on the basis of taste. It isn't in good taste, they say, it isn't classy. But the issue goes much deeper than that. Filthy language and name-calling are always an expression of contempt. Which shows that we are a culture floating on a sea of contempt.

The Nazi attitude toward the Russians and the Slavic peoples in the East is the extreme example of contempt. The Nazis didn't hate these peoples like they did the Jews but just held them in contempt. They believed that they were subhuman and that the best they were suited for was being slaves to the Arian race. The Nazis did barbarous things to the Russian people when they invaded the east simply because they believed that it didn't really matter what they did to them. They weren't worthy of consideration of any kind.

I saw this same thing with Johnny Hutchinson when I attended Malone College. Johnny was a downs syndrome adult who was sort of our school mascot. He was on campus all day long, worked in the library, ate his meals in the cafeteria, hung around the dorms, led the cheering section at basketball games, and was perpetually pictured with the sophomores in the year book. Many of the students, the boys I'm talking about here, treated him poorly and teased him constantly. It wasn't because they were angry with him or hated him. It's just because they held him in contempt. They didn't believe him worthy of consideration.

Contempt is worse than anger. You can see that in the judgment that Jesus imposes for it. The judgment for anger is "guilty before the court." But the judgment for contempt is "guilty before the supreme court." The supreme court was a higher court than the one mentioned for anger. You can see then that the judgment for contempt is more severe than the judgment for anger. Jesus clearly implies here that contempt is worse than anger and He was right of course. As bad as anger is, contempt is worse.

You can see that when you compare the two. In anger, I want to hurt you but in contempt I don't care whether you are hurt or not. You aren't even worth me considering whether you are hurt or not. I can be angry at you without denying your worth but my contempt by its very nature does deny your worth.

Contempt though always does hurt doesn't it. It diminishes and can even destroy people's self-image. It causes tremendous inner pain to those to whom it is directed.

One of you told me a story that illustrates perfectly what contempt is. A young man this person knows was waiting on a table of people, one of who was one of the most successful businessmen in the United States. As the young waiter walked away from the table, the businessman said something. Thinking that he was talking to him, the waiter asked, "WERE YOU TALKING TO ME?" To which the businessman replied, "WHY IN THE F--- WOULD I BE TALKING TO YOU."

That kind of attitude and behavior is abominable. It devastates people more than anger does and thus receives an even greater punishment.

Malice **5:22**

To this point, Jesus has mentioned to inner evils – anger and contempt. In the last part of verse 22, He moves to a third inner evil – malice. Notice how he describes this evil. It is calling someone a "fool."

Calling someone a "fool" today isn't all that serious is it? My favorite television show back in the 1980's was "The A-Team." Remember that was a favorite word of Mr. T's, "fool." All that word means to us is someone who is dull or lacks wisdom.

But the word "fool" in ancient times has much more serious connotations. I did a study of Proverbs, one of the main subjects of which is "the fool." The word "fool" in Proverbs doesn't address our intellectual condition; it addresses our moral condition. In Proverbs and the culture of Jesus, a fool was a moral pervert. It was a person who was knowingly and willfully wicked. So, calling someone a fool was one of the greatest of all insults.

About 10 years ago, four or five cars pulled into our parking lot after school was out. Apparently, two high school boys had a conflict of some kind that day and were going to fight it out in our parking lot. When I went out to see what was going on, the two were yelling insults at each other and one called the other a f----- a----- . Calling someone a fool in ancient times was like calling someone that today.

You can see then the inner condition that Jesus addresses here – malice. Malice is an inner condition of personal hatred or ill will. It exudes animosity toward someone and wants harm to come to him or her.

An extreme example of this is Adolph Hitler's personal hatred of the Jews. I told you that he held the Slaves in contempt. But he hated the Jews with a passion. And as with anger, the inner evil of malice usually leads to outer action. In this case, the action was the wholesale slaughter of 6 million Jews.

Reflect on the things that people say and do and you will see malice all around you. When I was a boy, there was a lady in our church who didn't like the pastor. Actually, she couldn't stand him. She verbally attacked him on a regular basis to others. But the worse thing she did what rattle her keys while he was preaching. I admit that he was long winded, preaching 35 and 40-minute sermons. But she shouldn't have done what she did – start rattling her keys when she thought he should finish and he didn't. That is malice.

Notice what the punishment for malice is in verse 22 - "go into the fiery hell." The Greek words translated "fiery hell" is "Gehenna." Gehenna was a garbage dump outside of Jerusalem that was always smoldering with flames. So, Jesus is saying that malice justifies God consigning us to the smoldering garbage dump of human existence.

What we have then is a progression in verse 22. The punishment for anger isn't as bad as the punishment for contempt, which isn't as bad as the punishment for malice. We go from something really bad, anger, to something worse, contempt, to something that is the worst of all, malice. Contempt is worse than anger and malice is worse than contempt.

Let's now put verses 21-22 in their larger perspective and summarize them. Remember what Jesus is doing. He is contrasting the righteousness of the Pharisees with the righteousness of the kingdom of God in six different contexts. Verses 21-22 reveal the first contrast. The Pharisees said that we are righteous if we don't kill people. Jesus says that we are righteous if we don't have the three inner conditions that he mentions: anger, contempt, and malice. He says that we are unrighteous if we have anger, contempt, and malice even if we don't act them out and kill someone.

Eternally Important People **5:23-26**

Look at the word "therefore" in verse 23. That word shows that verses 23-26 are connected in thought and theme with verses 21-22. What we have to determine of course is how they are.

These verses appear to be the positive counterpart of verses 21-22. It isn't enough to know only what we shouldn't be. We must also know what we should be. Verses 23-26 are about just that - what we should be.

Jesus tells us what that is by simply illustrating it. There are two illustrations here that reveal what we should be in the context of the first contrast. We figure out what that is by asking this question as we study the two illustrations, "what kind of thought life and emotional life would we find in a person who does these two things?" Keep that question in mind as we examine the two illustrations here.

The first illustration is in verses 23 and 24. Notice the situation here. I am offering one of the kinds of sacrifice that Leviticus 1-7 describes. I am with the priests at the altar of the temple about to present my animal sacrifice to the Lord.

This is one of the holiest moments in my spiritual life. It is so holy in fact that nothing is allowed to interrupt it except some other overriding ceremonial matter. It was a matter of practice in the 1st century world of Jesus that this ceremony couldn't be interrupted for any other reason

But right in the middle of the ceremony, something happens. I remember that someone is mad at me – that someone has something against me. I am so bothered by this breach in our relationship that I stop the ceremony, leave the temple, find him or her, and try to make up.

Try to grasp how astonishing of a thing this would have been in the 1st century world of Jesus, which His audience would have understood. To help you grasp that, let me put it in terms that you are able to appreciate.

Let's think about one of the most important moments of my life – my recording or ordaining as a minister in the Friends Church. I was recorded as a minister in 1978 during one of the evening service of our Yearly Meeting. There were probably a 1000 people there including my family and friends who came especially for this occasion of my recording. The denomination has planned a formal ceremony involving a number of people including one of my college professors.

Now, suppose that everything is going as planned and the ceremony is underway. But then suddenly, right in the middle of it, as the General Superintendent is asking me questions, I remember that John Easterday is mad at me for some reason. I am so bothered by that breach in my relationship with him that I stop the ceremony, walk out of it, find John and try to make up.

I have a question for you. What kind of thought life and emotional life would we find in a person did that?

The second illustration is in verses 25-26 and takes place in a different kind of context. The first context is the temple. The second is the court, which is why I, a former attorney, appreciate it so much.

This illustration is about settling a lawsuit. Someone has sued me or I have sued someone. The lawsuit has been filed and is proceeding forward. Let's suppose that we've already had a pre-trial with a judge in it.

I get a kick out of this verse because it shows us what Jesus thought about the legal system of His day and ours – not very much. Notice the last part of verse 25 and 26, “SO THAT YOUR OPPONENT MAY NOT HAND YOU OVER TO THE JUDGE, AND THE JUDGE TO THE OFFICER, AND YOU BE THROWN INTO PRISON. TRULY I SAY TO YOU, YOU WILL NOT COME OUT OF THERE UNTIL YOU HAVE PAID UP THE LAST CENT.” Obviously we didn’t expect things to turn out this way but they did. Jesus is warning us about getting caught up in this human system because it will drain us financially and psychologically if we do.

I could spend an hour giving you equivalent examples of what Jesus is saying here. I think of a \$10,000 contract case that cost the plaintiff \$15,000 in attorney fees to win. The company wins the case but goes to the bank \$5000 poorer because of it. That is the kind of thing Jesus has in mind in verses 25-26.

But Jesus’ main message isn’t about avoiding lawsuits. It’s about what we do once we’re in one.

To understand what that message is we have to understand the nature of lawsuits themselves. Lawsuits take place in what the legal profession calls “an adversarial context.” Notice how cases are captioned on all the documents. Suppose Pauline sues me for something. The caption would read “Pauline Kunce v. (versus) Bobby Murphy.” Versus is certainly the right word because plaintiffs and defendants in lawsuits really are adversaries – not just legally but relationally as well. They usually dislike and even hate each other.

I know this because I’ve practiced law and seen the hostility between the parties involved. This hostility is already there when the case is filed and then just escalates as it proceeds.

I’ll never forget a client of mine named Linda. Linda was stopped at a red light when the defendant in the lawsuit just coincidentally pulled up behind her. One of two things happened depending on whose story you believed. My client said that the defendant pulled forward when he saw it was she and crashed into the back of her car. The defendant on the other hand said that my client put her car in reverse when she saw it was he and crashed into the front of his car. I don’t know which story was true but the larger point is this. There was animosity between the plaintiff and defendant when the case started that only grew more intense as it proceeded.

But notice in contrast what Jesus pictures happening here. I make my opponent at law my friend. I am well disposed and kindly toward him, so much so that I actually seek his well being in the case. I dispose of the case in a way is good for him. That doesn't mean that I necessarily let him get everything he wants but I do seek what is good and fair for him even if it means sacrifice for me.

I had a domestic relations case in which my client's husband left her for another woman, 14 years younger than he. I negotiated a settlement with the other attorney in which she got 67% of the assets. She wouldn't take it though because she said that she deserved everything. I agreed but told her it's no fault divorce and if it went to trial she'd only get 50%, which is what happened. I dropped the case and she got another lawyer. It went to trial and she got only 50% of the assets.

But imagine this if you can. My client is actually well disposed and kindly toward her husband. Suppose she has a better job than he and when I tell her I have a 67% settlement, she won't take it. She says instead that all she wants is 50%. That is the kind of thing Jesus envisions here.

I ask you the same question in the second illustration that I asked in the first. What kind of thought life and emotional life would we find in a person who did that?

Well, let's answer that question now. What kind of thought life and emotional life would we find in a person who did the two things that Jesus describes in verses 23-26?

The answer is "a thought life that values and an emotional life that feels the value of people." That is what verses 21-26 are all about – believing and feeling the value of people.

Did you ever notice how well we take care of things that we treasure? I remember how much I treasured my ball glove growing up and how well I cared for it. I always kept it in a safe place, oiled it regularly, looked out after it, and just generally did what was good for it.

It is the very same way with people. When we believe in and feel their value, when we treasure them, we just naturally seek their well being. We just naturally don't say and do things that are bad for them. We just naturally say and do things that are good for them – no matter who they are or what the context is.

Suppose, for instance, that you are selling your house. You ask \$10,000 more for it than it is actually worth thinking that people will dicker and eventually give you what it's worth. But a young couple looks at it and not knowing any better, offers you what you are asking. Explain to me the outcome of that scenario if you the seller have the condition of thought and emotion that the persons in verses 23-26 have. You will not take the \$10,000 more than it's worth but only its real value because you treasure the young couple who wants to buy it.

That is what these verses are all about. I would summarize them this way. You all know the term "VIP." That communicates that someone is a very important person. But that doesn't really do justice to the condition of thought and feeling we see here. We are to have the condition of thought and feeling that regards and treats that person as an "EIP." That means an "eternally important person."

That brings us to the central question that each section of the Sermon on the Mount raises. How do we become the kind of person who does this?

The general answer is that we do certain things that enable the Holy Spirit to transform us into the image and likeness of Jesus. We will then be the kind of person who just naturally does the specific action that we are discussing.

The first part of our trilogy revealed some of those certain things that we should do. One is that we should practice the presence of God. Another is that we should practice spiritual disciplines that are appropriate to what we're hoping to achieve. The third part of our trilogy will elaborate on those disciplines and give us a model for accomplishing growth in targeted areas of our personality and life.

But I do want to offer some practical suggestions that you can implement now in order to begin growing. I've done that with anger already for instance. I gave you six practical suggestions to begin eliminating it. I want to do the same thing now with regarding and treating people as EIP's.

What we have to do to accomplish that is to begin seeing people in a new light. That simply means that we have to begin developing a new perspective on the people that we live and deal with. This is a mental exercise that ends up impacting not only our thinking but our feeling and acting as well.

The way that we develop this new perspective is to study. We study what the Bible has to say about people and we study people themselves. This study opens our eyes to the tremendous value that every human being we encounter has. That in turn conditions the way we feel and act toward them.

Ravi Zacharias tells about his wife and he seeing an unkept, unwashed, unwashed street person going through the garbage can on the sidewalk. He was foraging like an animal for food. Ravi's wife commented when she saw him, 'TO THINK THAT HE WAS ONCE A BABY, HELD IN THE ARMS OF HIS MOTHER WHILE SHE DREAMED GREAT DREAMS FOR HIM.' Her comment shows deeper thought doesn't it about the human beings that we encounter each day. It's that kind of thought that gives us the perspective we need to deal with them.

Studying human beings and seeing them for what they really are is a spiritual discipline that I constantly practice. It helps me see them in ways that others probably don't see them.

I've shared one of those ways with you in a sermon several years ago. When I deal with people in settings like the two Jesus discusses in verses 23-26, I see them as someone's son or daughter. I know how precious my sons are to me and how deeply I love them. I know that I want others to think about and treat them the way I do. I think about that often when I'm dealing with people in different situations. I am dealing with someone's son or daughter and they would want me to regard and treat them the way they do.

So study and see people in a new light. It will help you value them the way Jesus commands us to here.

We have now finished the first contrast in the Sermon on the Mount. The righteousness of the Pharisees = do not murder (outer act). The righteousness of the kingdom of God = valuing people (inner reality) so much that there is no anger, contempt, or malice toward them.

Lust 5:27-30

If I asked you, "what are the two major themes in modern movies," what would you say? The answer most certainly is violence and sex. The fact is the violence and sex are two of the biggest problems that we face in the world today.

Jesus has already addressed the subject of violence in verses 21-26. I say that because if we value people and eliminate anger, contempt, and malice, then we eliminate violence.

Now, in verses 27-30, Jesus addresses the second big problem we have – sex. Joe Seaborn wrote a book titled Winning Over Temptation. In the early stages of his research for the book, he took a survey that asked only two questions. First, what is the number one temptation that you face in life? And second, how old are you? The results were revealing. They clearly showed one sin more than any other that people are tempted to commit. That sin is lust. Here is where lust placed in each age category. 10 to 15 year olds: lust was the 4th most frequently given answer. 16 to 20 year olds: lust was 1st. 21 to 30: 1st. 31 to 40: 1st. 41-50: 3rd. 51 to 60: 2nd. 61 to 70: 3rd. And 71 and older: didn't make the list.

This survey only confirms what most of us already know. Lust is probably the greatest temptation that people face. It is something that we must eliminate from our lives if we want to have a familiar friendship with Jesus.

ADULTERY

Let's start with verse 27, which reveals the righteousness of the Pharisees. The Pharisees focused on the outer act and said that we are righteous if we do not commit adultery.

The Pharisees were quoting the 7th of the 10 commandments of course. It is clear in that context what adultery is. It is a husband or wife having sexual relations with someone who isn't their spouse.

That's adultery and almost all writers in ethics today think that it's okay if it's done in the right way. To some, it is done in the right way if no child is conceived. The command doesn't prohibit sexual relations, they say, but adulterating our family lineage. Thus, the command is "don't conceive a child by a non-spouse."

To others, adultery is done in the right way if the people involved have romantic feelings for each other. That is the most common view in American culture today, among the intelligentsia at least. If there are romantic feelings and mutual consent, sexual relations are never wrong even if they are extra-marital.

One of America's most well known and respected psychiatrists, Dr. Joyce Brothers, epitomizes this view. She writes in one of her books that under the right circumstances, adultery can be a healthy and therapeutic thing for a marriage.

That may be the current view but it certainly isn't the right one. It is absolutely and simply wrong.

The great Greek philosopher and moralist Aristotle expressed the right view 400 years before Jesus. He said that there is no such thing as "committing adultery with the right woman, at the right time, and in the right way for it is . . . simply wrong."

That is God's view. Adultery is always and absolutely wrong. There is no such thing as adultery done in the right way. Even if there are no children and even if there are romantic feelings and mutual consent, it is wrong. The very fact that we have to say that so adamantly, so vigorously, really is an indictment of the culture in which we live.

TRANSITION

But suppose we don't commit adultery and are always faithful to our spouse. Or if we are single, suppose that we don't have sex before marriage. Does that make us righteous sexually? Does that make us right sexually before God? The Pharisees answered "yes." But Jesus answered "no."

That is His very point in verse 28 in fact. It isn't enough to not commit adultery or to not have pre-marital sex. We can do both of those things and still not be right sexually before God. To be right sexually before God, we must also not lust.

To not lust, of course, we must first of all figure out what lust is.

WHAT LUST IS

Several versions of the Bible translate verse 28, "EVERYONE WHO LOOKS AT A WOMAN (or man I would add) WITH DESIRE."

The word "desire" is a bad translation that causes all kinds of problems for many serious Christians who read it.

A young man, in high school, came to my office visibly upset one day. He was trying to be a good Christian and follow Jesus, he said, but just couldn't. When I asked him what the problem was, he told me that he was constantly lusting. He then went on to explain how. He said there were so many good looking girls at school and that when he'd see them, he'd enjoy how attractive they were and lot of times even feel sexual desire for them. "What's wrong with me," he asked, "WHAT CAN I DO."

I have a question for you. Was that young man lusting? Is seeing someone and immediately feeling sexual desire lust? I believe that the answer is "no."

Someone summarize for me the two kinds of anger that we discussed. First, there is the initial spontaneous response that rises to alert us to an obstruction of our will or an injustice and then dies down as quickly as it rose up. Second, there is the longer lasting anger that we have indulged and kept alive.

Well, just as there are two kinds of anger, so there are two kinds of sexual desire.

The first is an initial spontaneous response that rises quickly and then passes just as quickly. God made us with this mechanism because it serves a useful and necessary purpose. It assures us that we will carry out His command to be fruitful and multiply.

Sexual desire as an initial spontaneous response is not what Jesus is talking about in verse 28. If we see a man or woman and sexual desire rises in us quickly and then passes just as quickly, we have not sinned. This is a temptation to sin but it is not a sin. Temptation to sin is not wrong. Giving in to the temptation is.

The second kind of sexual desire is an initial response that is indulged and sustained. Notice the language in verse 28, "EVERYONE WHO LOOKS AT A WOMAN WITH LUST." The Greek wording here is easily translated and its meaning is clear. Jesus is talking about looking at someone for the purpose of desiring him or her. We desire to desire in other words.

What happens is that we see someone and sexual desire rises. That is not a sin. But instead of looking away and letting it quickly pass, we indulge and cultivate it. We keep looking and enjoy the desire that looking is giving us. This is what Jesus calls adultery in the heart.

That helps us understand what lust is. It is using someone's visual presence as a means of savoring sexual desire. Desiring sexual desire is the purpose for which we are looking at or thinking about him or her.

Notice I said not just looking at but thinking about someone. I say that because we can keep on looking long after the person is gone. We call this fantasizing. We picture them in our mind and desire them over and over again. We need to understand that thinking about someone's visual presence is the same as looking at it.

However we do it, lust is using someone's visual presence as a means of savoring sexual desire. It is looking at or picturing them in our mind for the purpose of desiring them.

Notice the startling statement Jesus makes in that regard. He declares in verse 28 that to lust is to commit adultery in our heart. As always, He goes beyond the outer act to the inner condition. He does that because it is the inner condition that causes or leads to the outer act.

Let me ask you just that. What are the outer acts that the inner condition of lust leads to? The fact is that there are numerous expressions of lust: ogling people, looking at pornography, calling 900 numbers, watching strip tease shows, sexually harassing people, giving attractive people preferential treatment and more.

Lust is the seed of those and all sexual sins. Eliminate lust and all those things would be eliminated as well.

That's why Jesus says what He says in verse 28. Lusting is just as wrong as adultery is. That statement shows that the person who lusts is not the kind of person who is at home in the goodness of God's kingdom.

ELIMINATING LUST

That is why we absolutely positively must eliminate lust and the acts it leads to from our lives.

That is the negative side of what God wants from us. As always, that negative side has a positive counterpart. That positive counterpart is "be right sexually before God." A kingdom person is one who is right sexually before God.

But how do we do that? There are two things that work against us in that regard. The first is the strength and power of the sex drive itself. The second is the sexually saturated culture in which we live. So how do we go about not lusting and being right sexually before God in that kind of context?

There are three things that we need to do to eliminate lust and be right sexually before God. The first two are found in Job 31:1-12 and the second is found in Matthew 5:29-30.

DEVELOP A WELL THOUGHT OUT POLICY REGARDING SEX

The first thing that we need to do is develop a well thought out policy regarding sex.

You can see that in Job 31:1-4. In chapters 27-31, Job defends his integrity in all the different aspects of his life to his three friends. Here, in verses 1-12, he explains the integrity of his sexual life to them.

Verses 1-4 reveal the foundation upon which that integrity is built. Verse 1 says that he made a covenant with his eyes. "Covenant" is the key word. It means he has an understanding with his eyes that they will not engage in ogling women. After all, he says in verses 3 and 4, God would see his gaze.

These verses show us that we cannot just wing it when it comes to sex. Again, we live in a sex-saturated culture and we are going to be destroyed if we just wing it. So, we develop a well thought out policy regarding sex just like Job did.

We do that by studying the Bible, sex itself, and the culture, all the while asking for the Holy Spirit's guidance and help. Based on what we learn, we then develop a plan for being right sexually before God. We decide ahead of time what we must and must not do in specific situations.

The example I often use is of a single Christians dating or going steady. One of the issues in that context is how physically intimate should a Christian be. So, he or she develops a well thought out policy in that regard.

That policy is that physical intimacy in a relationship should be increased only to the degree that commitment to the relationship is increased. The Christian knows that when people move an inch toward commitment but a mile toward physical intimacy, the relationship is damaged and everyone is hurt. So he or she develops a policy, "I WILL MOVE TOWARD PHYSICAL INTIMACY AT THE SAME RATE THAT I MOVE TOWARD COMMITMENT."

I myself have developed a well thought out policy regarding sex. Part of that policy is that I will not watch or listen to sexually suggestive television commercials. Another part of that policy is that I will not even glance at the magazines at checkout counters.

What I'm trying to say is that we shouldn't just wing it when it comes to sex. We should develop a well thought out policy regarding it instead.

MAKE OUR BODILY PARTS CONFORM TO OUR POLICY

The second thing we must do to eliminate lust and be right sexually before God is make our bodily parts conform to our policy.

You can see that in Job 31:5-12. In these verses, Job tells his friends that he has lived consistently with his policy. He tells them in some detail what he has and has not done. He says in verse 7, for instance, that he has not allowed his feet to take him to wrong places or his hands to touch what is inappropriate to touch.

These verses show us the second thing that we must do. We must make our eyes, ears, hands, feet, mind, and heart walk within the well thought out policy that we have developed. We make our bodily parts, including our mind, conform to our plan. We simply do not allow those parts to dally or trifle with sex.

Suppose a Christian young man has the policy in place that I mentioned before and is on a first date. He won't have any physical contact with the date because there isn't any commitment. He does not allow his hand to hold the date's hand. He does not allow his lips to touch her lips.

Suppose he continues dating and some commitment develops between him and her. So he starts holding hands with her and as the commitment grows may even kiss her. But he continues to let physical intimacy grow only as much as the commitment has.

That necessarily means then that he will not go all the way in physical intimacy until he goes all the way in commitment, that is, until he marries.

Another example of this is a part of the policy that I've developed. Knowing that the battle is won or lost in the mind, my policy is to not entertain any sexually impure thoughts. Having established that policy, I do not allow my mind to entertain them. I've told you before that the mind is the place of our widest and most basic freedom. We are free to think about or not think about whatever we choose. In that regard, we may not be able to control the thoughts that pop into our minds. But as John Wesley said it, we don't have to let them nest there. So I don't. I immediately dismiss any impure thoughts about everything including sexual things. I make my mind conform to my policy.

That then is the second thing that we must do to eliminate lust and be right sexually before God. We must make our bodily parts conform to the well thought out policy that we've developed.

BE PURE

The third thing that we must do is to be pure. You can see that in Matthew 5:29-30.

Jesus responds to the Pharisees in these verses. They defined being right sexually before God in terms of outer behavior or act. If you do that, Jesus says in these verses, then you should gouge out your eyes and cut off your hands. That way you can't possibly do any impure sexual acts. You would be a mutilated stump but right sexually before God.

That kind of thing is the logical conclusion thinking like the Pharisees thought. Some Christians down through the centuries, who thought like the Pharisees thought, actually took it to that conclusion. 1900 years ago, for instance, a church father named Origen had himself castrated so that he couldn't possibly fornicate, that is, have pre-marital sex.

But Jesus debunks that kind of thinking here. He implies that we can be a mutilated stump that can't do anything sexually impure but still have an evil heart.

His point is that being right sexually before God isn't a matter of what we do but what we are. If we have a kingdom heart, there won't be any room inside us for lust. We will be in our very nature the kind of person who doesn't lust and act lustfully. We will be pure and thus right inside.

Being pure and not lustful is a partnership between heaven and earth. Heaven's part is for the Holy Spirit to touch the very core of our being and transform us inside. Earth's part is for us to place ourselves before Him so that He can do just that.

We learned how to do that in the first part of our trilogy. We must practice the presence of God and practice the spiritual disciplines that are appropriate to sexual purity. Study, fasting, and self-sacrifice are several of those disciplines. We will learn more things that we can do in the third part of the trilogy.

CONCLUSION

I close our discussion of verses 27-30 by quoting David Goergen. He writes, "SEXUALITY AND SPIRITUALITY ARE FRIENDS." That means that the more spiritual we are, the more sexually pure we will be inside. Lust may be the biggest temptation of our life but it isn't as powerful as spirituality is. Sexuality and spirituality are friends. So, be spiritual.

At this point then, we have two contrasts between the righteousness of the Pharisees and the righteousness of the kingdom of God:

#1: Pharisees – don't kill
Kingdom of God – value people and no anger, contempt, or malice

#2: Pharisees – don't commit adultery
Kingdom of God – don't lust

Divorce **5:31-32**

We now come to the third contrast in verses 31-32. These verses address one of the most significant and highly charged issues of our day in both the church and culture – divorce.

This issue impacts all of us either directly and indirectly. Even if we ourselves never divorce, there are people we care about who have or will. So we need to know what the Bible says about it. What that is, is found in the following passages: Deuteronomy 24:1-4; Malachi 2:16; Matthew 5:31-32; Matthew 19:3-12; Mark 10:1-12; Luke 16:18; and 1 Corinthians 7:10-16. Let's take a look at verses 31-32 here in the context of all of these passages.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE PHARISEES

Remembering that Jesus is contrasting the righteousness of the Pharisees with kingdom righteousness, let's begin with what the Pharisees taught about divorce.

Verse 31 shows us that they based what they taught on Deuteronomy 24:1-4. The first three verses record a hypothetical situation. A man divorces his wife. The fourth verse is the basic thrust of the passage. It commands that the man can never remarry her.

Verse 1 reveals what the custom or tradition was among the Jews when Moses wrote the passage. Please understand that. Verse 1 doesn't establish this tradition. It just recognizes that it already exists among the people. That tradition was that husbands could divorce their wives when they found some "indecent" in them. If they did divorce them, they had to give them a certificate of divorce.

It is imperative that we understand something. God did not set up this system of divorce that verses 1-3 comment on. The Jewish people themselves did. They probably got the idea for a certificate of divorce from the Egyptians who used writing in all the aspects of their lives. This certificate usually read: "LET THIS BE FROM ME THY WRIT OF DIVORCE AND LETTER OF DISMISSAL AND DEED OF LIBERATION, THAT THOU MAYEST MARRY WHATSOEVER MAN THOU WILT."

This certificate was a good thing for women. It proved their status as unmarried. That in turn allowed them to make their living as a prostitute without being put to death for adultery. It also allowed them to seek remarriage to another.

The controversial part of the Deuteronomy passage is the phrase "some indecent in her." This is also translated "some uncleanness in her."

In all matters of Old Testament and other Jewish law, there were two different schools of thought at the time of Jesus. There was the school of rabbi Shammai, which was the strict, conservative school. There was also the school of rabbi Hillel, which was the broad-minded liberal school. As we will soon see, these two schools have their modern day counterparts in the church.

The school of Shammai taught that "indecent" means adultery. Proponents of this view taught and I quote one of their writings, "LET A WIFE BE AS MISCHIEVOUS AS THE WIFE OF AHAB; SHE CANNOT BE DIVORCED EXCEPT FOR ADULTERY."

The school of Hillel taught that "indecent" means anything that displeases the husband. Proponents of this view taught, for instance, that a man could divorce his wife for burning or putting too much salt in his dinner or even if he found another woman that was more attractive to him than she was. The man could divorce his wife for basically any reason in other words.

These two views made the divorce issue one of the hottest topics of Jesus' day. That is why the Pharisees asked him about it in Mark 10 in fact. They assumed that no matter what he said, He'd alienate at least half of his followers by saying it.

Which of these two views do you suppose that the vast majority of 1st century husbands adopted? That's right, they adopted the view of Hillel. They believed that they could divorce their wives for any reason at all. They did so because one of the foremost things in the 1st century male mind was to get rid of a wife that did not please him. So they just naturally adopted and live out Hillel's view because it suited their purposes.

Now, to understand what Jesus teaches about divorce, you have to understand how despicable what 1st century males believed about divorce and did was. To understand that, you need to know two things.

First, what they believed about divorce reflected what they believed about women. They believed that women were no more than property that they could dispose of at any time. That is what divorce was to them – nothing more than disposing of or throwing away property.

That explains why no legal process was involved in it. The husband didn't have to go to court to divorce his wife. All he had to do was dismiss her in the presence of two witnesses. It wasn't much more involved than throwing out the trash.

There's a second thing you need to know to understand how despicable what 1st century males believed about divorce was. Divorce essentially destroyed a woman's life – for two reasons. First, no jobs or professions were available to women so that they could support themselves. And second, divorce stigmatized them for the rest of their lives. Society considered them losers for the rest of their life because their husbands had divorced them. Divorce hardly affected the husband at all because he had a profession or job and society didn't stigmatize divorced males. But it destroyed the wife's life.

Divorced women in the first century world had only three options available to them. First, they could find a place in the home of a generous relative. But you know what it's like living with relatives. The relatives often took them in grudgingly and regarded them as mere servants. Second, they could remarry. But subsequent husbands usually regarded them as damaged goods and the marriage usually wasn't a good one. And third, they could find a place in the community as a prostitute. That was one of the reasons that the 1st century world permitted prostitution. It was the only way a lot of women could survive.

You can see then the devastating effect that Hillel's view had on women. And yet, it's the very view that the Pharisees themselves adopted. They believed that a husband could divorce his wife for any reason.

But they did require that he give her a certificate of divorce. They embraced the practice that the Israelites had adopted in Egypt and which is mentioned in Deuteronomy 24:1. They insisted on it in fact that the husband give the wife he divorced a certificate of divorce.

That was their righteousness then. They said that a man who divorces his wife is righteous if he gives her a certificate of divorce. If I divorce my wife because she burned my pork chops or because she doesn't make chili enough, I am still righteous if I give her a certificate of divorce. It doesn't matter that her life is destroyed, that she has to become a prostitute to live, giving her the certificate of divorce makes me righteous.

FOUR VIEWS OF DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

Now that we know about divorce in the 1st century world and the views regarding it, including the Pharisees', let's examine those same two things today – divorce in 21st century America and the views regarding it.

I do want to point out one of the things that we can infer from Deuteronomy 24, which Moses wrote 1400 years before Jesus. Almost as long as human beings have been marrying, they have been divorcing.

But not like we are in America today. Every state of the union now has no fault divorce, which means that people can get divorced for any reason or for no reason at all. And they do. America has the highest divorce rate in the world. For every 100 couples who get married this year, 60 of those will eventually break up. There are one million divorces, or dissolution's, every year in America. There is almost no family that it does not touch. What is striking is that church attendance doesn't impact those figures at all. The divorce rate today for people who attend church is basically the same as for those who don't. 60% of church people who now get married eventually get divorced.

Those are the facts and the passages about divorce in the Bible reveal the issues. #1 is it always a sin to divorce or is it sometimes not a sin to divorce. #2 – if it sometimes is not a sin, when is that? And #3 – if it isn't a sin to divorce, is it a sin to remarry? By remarry I mean marry another person.

God's people debated those issues 2000 years ago and we are still debating them today. Christians today have four different views. Before I discuss those, let me ascertain what you believe. I told you last week to crystallize your thinking about divorce and be ready to apply what you believe to some real life situations. Here are the situations, which are taken from my experiences as a pastor and lawyer before coming to Bethel. Tell me two things. Is it a sin to divorce in the situation?. Is it a sin to remarry in the situation?

#1: A man marries a woman (my wife's best friend from high school) as a cover for his homosexuality so he won't be fired as a fireman. He continues to practice his homosexuality after their marriage. Is it a sin for her to divorce him? To remarry?

#2: A Christian's wife announces to him one day after 18 years of marriage that she is not happy with him anymore and divorces him. As far as he knows, she was not seeing someone else? Is it a sin for him to remarry?

#3: A wife wakes up and finds a note from her husband that he's doesn't love her anymore and is leaving the state. She finds him 6 months later in Colorado and asks him to come home but he says he won't and never will. Is it a sin for her to divorce him? To remarry?

#4: A man's anger and outrageous emotional abuse is literally brutalizing his wife and children. She pleads with him for several years to get help but he refuses. Is it a sin for her to divorce him? To remarry?

#5: A man has a six-month affair with a co-worker. His wife finds out, whereupon he breaks off his relationship with the co-worker, repents, and asks forgiveness. Is it a sin for her to divorce him? To remarry?

Those real life situations affirm just how critical it is that we understand what Jesus and the Bible teach about divorce and remarriage and apply it correctly to real life circumstances. Keeping that in mind, let's examine the four different views (that I know of at least) that Christians have about divorce and remarriage.

The first view is that divorce and remarriage are always wrong for any reason. People who hold this view base it on Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18, which contain no grounds for divorce. I have never known anyone who has this view but have read about several who do.

This view says that divorce and remarriage are always wrong. There are no grounds for divorce including adultery. Anyone who divorces his spouse for any reason, including adultery, has sinned. Consequently, divorced people, even those whose spouses committed adultery and divorced them, sin if they remarry.

Let's apply this view to real life situation #1 above. My wife's best friend divorced her actively homosexual husband. This view says that she sinned in doing that and sins again if she remarries.

The second view is that divorce and remarriage are always wrong except for the cause of sexual immorality. People who hold this view base it on Matthew 19:9 and Matthew 5:32.

In both of those verses, Jesus seems to open the door to divorce. He uses the exclusionary phrase, "except for unchastity."

This view says that people are free to divorce and remarry if their spouse commits sexual immorality. It is not a sin to divorce and remarry under those circumstances. But people aren't free to divorce and remarry if their spouse has not committed sexual immorality. If they divorce under those circumstances, they have committed one sin. If they remarry, they have committed another sin, which is continual adultery with their new spouse.

This view also contends that a divorced person's new spouse is committing continual adultery. It interprets Matthew 5:32 and Luke 16:18 as teaching this, "and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

Pursuant to this view, my wife's best friend in high school did not sin by divorcing her homosexual husband because he committed sexual immorality. Furthermore, she would not sin by remarrying.

The third view says that divorce is never wrong but that remarriage can be. It argues that the focus of Jesus in Matthew 5:32; 19:9; and Luke 16:18 isn't on divorce but remarriage. Jesus doesn't prohibit divorce in these verses. It is not a sin to divorce for any reason. But it can be a sin to remarry depending on the grounds for the divorce. If the ground was not sexual immorality, then remarriage is a sin. If the ground was sexual immorality, then remarriage is not a sin.

Let's apply this view to situation #2 and the wife who tires of her husband after 18 years. Pursuant to this view, it is not a sin for her to divorce her husband or for him to divorce her. But it is a sin for her and even him to remarry since the ground of divorce was not sexual immorality.

That brings us to the fourth and final view which credible leaders like Dallas Willard, Richard Foster and others hold. This view says that divorce and remarriage are wrong except for the cause of hard heartedness. If people have a spouse whose heart is hard and who is making their life unbearable, then divorcing that spouse is not a sin. Neither is remarrying.

Richard Foster expresses this view better and more thoroughly than other proponent of it that I know in his book The Challenge of the Disciplined Life. Dallas Willard also has an excellent discussion in The Divine Conspiracy.

I will begin explaining this view by reading Matthew 19:3-9 and Mark 10:6-9. These are almost identical passages and so we will read and use only one, Matthew 19.

Let's start with verse 7 and what is just a critical question about the divorce passage in Deuteronomy 24 that we studied. Jesus reveals the urgency of a husband and wife not getting divorced in verses 4-6 (which we are going to look at in detail shortly). Having done that, the Pharisees ask Him what I believe is a logical and legitimate question. Why then did God's law through Moses not prohibit divorce? Remember what the law in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 was. A man who divorces his wife cannot remarry her. The Pharisees understood and I believe correctly so that this law impliedly permits divorce.

But why is that. If it's so urgent that a husband and wife not divorce, why then did God permit it in the Old Testament, especially since it essentially ruined a woman's life as we discussed earlier?

We don't have to conjecture what the answer is because Jesus tells us in verse 8. God permitted divorce in the Old Testament because the hearts of husbands were hard. Notice I said husbands because again divorce was not really an option for women. So Jesus is addressing husbands divorcing wives in these texts. Verse 8 verifies that, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives."

I want you to give this some deeper thought for a moment. Suppose that a husband in the Old Testament who wants to divorce his wife. Also suppose that the law of God through Moses prohibited him from doing that. What would be the practical result in their relationship? The tension would become unbearable wouldn't it. The final result in most instances would be that the husband would brutalize his wife. He would almost certainly emotionally abuse her and more often than not probably physically abuse her.

That shows us then why God permitted divorce in the Old Testament. It was in order to protect the woman. That was what He had primarily in mind. It was better for the man to divorce his wife than to brutalize her. In such cases, divorce ruined her life less than staying married did.

Those who hold the fourth view argue that Jesus taught what He taught about divorce for the same purpose that God permitted divorce in the Old Testament – to protect women. We already discussed how easily husbands could divorce wives and how it essentially ruined their lives. Jesus taught what He taught about divorce to oppose and eliminate this practice.

You can see Jesus' concern for women in the language of His teachings. Look at Matthew 5:32, for example. He is talking to men and saying you shouldn't divorce your wives because they burned dinner, gained weight, or so on as the school of Hillel allows. If you do, you make them commit adultery, which probably refers to them becoming prostitutes. Furthermore, those who marry them commit adultery, which probably refers to the new husband seeing her as damaged goods, still the wife of the first husband. You can see that Jesus taught what He taught to protect women – to eliminate the easy divorces that ruined their lives.

That crucial fact becomes the interpretive key for us. It shows us the single most significant feature of Jesus' teachings about divorce. Listen carefully to this. In His teachings on divorce, He is not establishing specific rules at all. He is striking instead at the very spirit in which people live with each other. That is premise is the very foundation of this fourth view on divorce. Jesus is not establishing specific rules at all. He is striking instead at the very spirit in which people live with each other.

You can see that by comparing Mark 10:11-12 with Matthew 5:32. In Mark 10, Jesus talks about a husband divorcing his wife, verse 11, and for the first and only time a wife divorcing her husband, verse 12. Compare what He says there with what He says in Matthew 5:32. What is the difference.

The difference is this. In Matthew 5:32, we can divorce if our spouse commits sexual immorality. In Mark 10:11-12, we can divorce for no reason at all. There is no exception here for sexual immorality as there is in other passages.

Why is that? Is Jesus contradicting Himself?

If His purpose is to set down specific and hard and fast rules, He is. In one passage, the rule is that you can divorce for the reason of sexual immorality. In another, the rule is that you cannot divorce for any reason. Those are contradictory rules.

But if He isn't establishing rules but striking at the spirit in which people live with each other, there isn't a contradiction. All of the passages are teaching the very same thing.

The Greek word translated "divorce" means literally "throw away." That helps us understand what He is teaching. The law of love governs everything including marriage and divorce. People who follow Jesus, people who have kingdom hearts, don't throw away anyone, especially their spouses. They love and cherish them instead and that really is the call of these passages. That is the simple law of divorce in the Bible. Don't throw your spouse away. Love and cherish him or her instead.

That shows us what we have to do then understand and apply the texts on divorce. We have to take Jesus' teaching on human relationships and interpret them in the context of our own world.

This is what Paul did in 1 Corinthians 7:10-16. In verses 10-11, Paul briefly summarizes the teachings of Jesus about divorce. But then he addresses a situation that Jesus never did. Many individuals had become Christians but their spouses had remained pagans.

These people had two questions. What was the status of their relationship with their spouse? And what should they do if their pagan spouses wanted to divorce?

If Paul had followed Jesus teaching to the letter in Mark 10, he would have told them that they were bound to the marriage relationship. If their spouses divorced them, they could never remarry unless sexual immorality were involved. If it weren't involved, they would be committing adultery if they did.

But Paul didn't tell them that. He commanded that they should stay in their marriage even if the pagan never became a Christian. But if the pagan left and dissolved the marriage, they were no longer bound, verse 15. That appears to mean that they can remarry. What God desires no matter what happens is peace.

Question – has Paul violated Jesus' teaching about divorce? If we interpret those teachings to be hard and fast rules, then yes, he has violated them.

But they are not hard and fast rules. They are simply expressions of the law of love. So Paul took that law of love and applied it to the specific situation that the Corinthians faced.

The fourth view says that we should do the same thing. We should take the law of love as the Bible defines it and apply it to the specific situations we face.

But if Jesus and the Bible don't give us a specific set of rules, then what guidance do they give us concerning when and when not to divorce. Thankfully, they do give us guidance that we are able to take and apply to our situations. Here is that guidance.

First, Malachi 2:16 tells us that God hates divorce. There certainly isn't anything vague about that. God despises it when one spouse throws another away. He does because it is so destructive.

That is the very point Jesus makes in the Matthew 19 passage. In verses 5-6, Jesus makes it clear that when a man and woman get married and consummate it, a unique one flesh bond is created. Marriage and consummation are life uniting acts. The whole self of the husband touches and affects the whole self of the wife and vice versa. That union is so strong and deep that it can't be disrupted without causing permanent damage to the individuals involved.

C.S. Lewis grasped the full implication of this in his classic, Mere Christianity. He writes that divorce is "LIKE CUTTING UP A LIVING BODY, AS A KIND OF SURGICAL OPEARTION . . . IT IS MORE LIKE HAVING BOTH YOUR LEGS CUT OFF THAN IT IS LIKE DISSOLVING A BUSINESS PARTNERSHIP OR EVEN DESERTING A REGIMENT." Divorce is like an amputation in other words.

Our culture presents divorce as a simple readjustment of partners. It isn't any big deal and if a person isn't happy with one marriage, end it and try another.

But Lewis and more importantly Jesus contend that it is much more than that. It is a devastating psychological experience that most people never get over or at least don't get over very quickly. No matter how right a divorce is, it still hurts in the depths of people's souls and often always will.

That means, absent Biblical grounds for divorce, marriage is for life. We shouldn't get divorced just because we're having trouble in our marriage. We also shouldn't get divorced until we've exhausted every possible resource and every possible way to heal our marriage.

That means we must absolutely never do it casually or too soon. Chuck Swindoll says it this way: "TWO PROCESSES SHOULD NEVER BE ENTERED INTO PREMATURELY: EMBALMING AND DIVORCE." Divorce should be the very last resort to which we turn.

But how do we know when we should turn to it? What are the Biblical grounds for divorce in other words. When should one spouse divorce another?

The fourth view says that the one and only Biblical grounds for divorce is hard heartedness. That is why God permitted it in Deuteronomy and that is what Jesus seems to be focusing on in the gospels – protecting one spouse from another that is hard hearted. A person can thus divorce and remarry when two things are true: (1) his or her spouse's heart is hard and (2) that spouse is making his or her life unbearable. When both of those things are true, a person may divorce and remarry.

Let's define both of those things. "Unbearable" means that a person's life is being ruined – not inconvenienced or simply diminished but ruined. "Hard heart" means that a spouse is not willing to even try correcting what is making the person's life unbearable.

Whether or not both of these conditions exist must be determined on a case by case basis. The person thinking about the divorce must prayerfully, carefully and intelligently determine if a spouse's heart is hard and his or her life unbearable.

Richard Foster assists us in doing that by articulating what he believes is the one and only ground for divorce: "WHEN IT IS CLEAR THAT THE CONTINUATION OF THE MARRIAGE IS SUBSTANTIALLY MORE DESCTRUCTIVE THAN A DIVORCE, THEN THE MARRIAGE SHOULD END." There are two key words here, "clear" and "substantially." Divorce is not wrong when it is **clear** that continuing the marriage is **substantially** more destructive than ending it. When that is the case, a person is free to divorce and remarry. I would add again though that the spouse must be hard hearted and unwilling to change.

But even then, when divorce is chosen, we must not simply "throw away" our hard hearted spouses. If we're kingdom people, we will divorce as an act of love. That means our divorce would be dictated by love and done for the honest good of the people involved. The bottom line is that divorce can be rightly done in spite of the heartbreak and loss that is sure to follow.

Let's apply this fourth view to several real life situations. Doing this will help us understand not only the view but its ramifications to human relationships.

#1 – A pastor's wife finds out that he is having an affair with the church secretary. She confronts him about it and he repents, asks her forgiveness, and begs her to give him another chance. If the fourth view is correct, is she free to divorce him and remarry?

The answer is "no." He does not have a hard heart at this point and she cannot divorce him.

#2 – A man marries a woman whose anger and rage is making his life miserable. She emotionally abuses him and on several occasions has even hit him. She says that she can't help it and finally goes to a psychiatrist who diagnoses her as bi-polar and puts her medication. The medication helps but she is still a difficult person to deal with and the husband is getting tired of it. If the fourth view is correct, is he free to divorce her and remarry?

The answer is "no." She apparently doesn't have a hard heart but an organic problem. This would have to be determined. In addition, his life isn't made unbearable just annoying. In this context, "for better or worse" seems to apply and he should stick with the marriage. He himself needs to experience personal transformation that will enable him to be happy in the situation.

But suppose she goes off the medications and stays off them. She refuses to take them. Also suppose that she begins physically attacking him again and totally disrupting his life. If the fourth view is correct, is he free to divorce and remarry?

This is an extremely difficult situation that I have been asked about by the husband. All I could say was the divorce should be the very last resort. That he must make sure that her heart is hard and this his life is unbearable. He must make sure that he has exhausted every possible avenue for help. He must not just give up on the marriage because he's tired of dealing with it.

#3 – a 20 year old woman marries. Three years later, her husband and she decide they aren't compatible and divorce. He remarries and has children. Ten years later, she comes to love and wants to marry a man she meets in her church.

If the fourth view is correct, is she free to remarry? Or is she doomed to remain single for the rest of her life because her first divorce was clearly wrong no matter what view we hold?

This is perhaps the most tension producing of all situations to me. Several individuals have asked me to remarry them under those circumstances. What should be done?

One view is that we must sometimes pay for our sins in this life. The woman divorced her husband without Biblical grounds. She has repented and so her sin is forgiven but it is not undone. Just as Moses was forgiven but not allowed to see the promised land, so this woman is forgiven but not allowed to remarry. She must remain single and alone the rest of her life. This is nothing more than the consequence of a choice she made early on in her life.

Another view is that the law of love applies. This situation can never be completely redeemed. If her husband divorced his present wife, their children and she would be subjected to one of life's most traumatic experiences, a broken home. If he doesn't and the woman we're discussing cannot remarry, she is deprived of the God ordained experience of marriage. God desires neither one of those outcomes. Consequently, He allows her to remarry which accomplishes the welfare of all the people involved better than the first two options. This is the most loving of the three possible outcomes for all the people involved, which is God's overriding concern.

I must admit that I vacillate between the two views. I tend to hold the first view but then when the real flesh and blood person is before me in love and wanting to get married, I embrace the second one. This is an extremely muddled issue that has no easy or simple solution. I myself feel troubled with both views.

Let me summarize the three contrasts we've discussed between the righteousness of the Pharisees and the kingdom of God.

Pharisees: don't kill

Kingdom: no anger, contempt, or malice but value people

Pharisees: don't commit adultery

Kingdom: don't lust but be sexually right before God

Pharisees: give a certificate when you throw away your wife

Kingdom: don't throw anyone away especially your wife

Manipulation

5:33-37

The fourth contrast is found in 5:33-37. Quakers are well known for their interpretation and application of these verses, both of which are wrong. They are not about what Quakers have thought they are about. Let's take a look at what they are really about.

Jesus discusses taking oaths or vows. Oaths are nothing more than statements that invoke a curse on us. There were several popular oaths that first century Jews used. Those included "as I live," "as the Lord lives," "as you live," "may the Lord witness against me," "as heaven is my witness," "by my head," and more.

People used these oaths in a particular context – when they wanted others to believe, give or do something. The gist of them was, "if what I'm saying isn't the truth" or "if I don't do what I say I will do," then "may a curse come upon me." That's what Jesus means when He mentions oaths or vows in these verses and it was common practice in first century Israel.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE PHARISEES

Verse 33 reveals what the Pharisees believed about oaths. You can use them but there are two rules you must follow in doing so.

The first rule was this. If the oath doesn't involve God, don't worry about whether or not what you say is true really is true. Also don't worry about whether or not you really do what you say you will do. If what you say isn't true or you don't do what you say, you haven't sinned because the oath didn't involve God.

Suppose for instance that I use the first century oath "as I live" but what I say isn't true or I don't do what I say. That is permissible because I didn't use God in the oath.

The second rule was this. If the oath does involve God, make sure that what you say is true. Or also make sure that you do what you say you will do. If what you say isn't true or you don't do what you say, you have sinned because the oath involved God.

Suppose for instance that I use the first century oath "as the Lord lives" or "as heaven is my witness" but what I say isn't true or I don't do what I say. That is prohibited because I used God or heaven in the oath.

We have our own modern day equivalents to those oaths don't we? When I was a boy, we finished playing ball at the schoolhouse and went down to Webster's grocery store to buy a soda and candy bar. My friend Curt didn't have enough money for the candy bar. He then asked me to buy it for him and said he'd pay me back. But I wasn't so sure he would and didn't want to give it to him. So he finally said "I'LL PAY YOU BACK. CROSS MY HEART, HOPE TO DIE, STICK A NEEDLE IN MY EYE."

There are other oaths that people use today including "I swear on my mother's grave," "I swear on a stack of Bibles," "as God is my witness," "I swear to God," "may I be struck dead" and more.

Let's apply the righteousness of the Pharisees to these oaths. Suppose Curt said what he said to me, I gave him the money, and he didn't pay me back. How would the Pharisees assess Curt and what he did? According to them, he was righteous whether he paid me back or not because his oath didn't involve God.

But suppose Curt had said, "AS GOD IS MY WITNESS, I'LL PAY YOU BACK," and then didn't pay me back. How would the Pharisees assess that? According to them, he was unrighteous because his oath did involve God.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

What a contrast that Pharisaical righteousness is to the righteousness of the kingdom. You can see the latter in verses 34-36. Jesus says here that we should make no oaths at all. Grasp the difference. The Pharisees said make as many oaths as you like but just be sure to perform the ones that involve God. But Jesus said make no oaths at all.

Jesus' little brother James learned this well from Him. He writes in James 5:12, "AND ABOVE ALL, MY BRETHREN, DO NOT SWEAR, EITHER BY HEAVEN OR BY EARTH OR WITH ANY OTHER OATH."

Jesus and James meant that literally you know. They don't want us using any of the oaths that the first century Jews used or their modern day equivalents. They have absolutely no place in the kingdom life.

A salesman was trying to sell me a 1992 Cavalier that I thought probably had more miles on it than the odometer showed. When I expressed that concern to him, he replied: "I SWEAR ON MY MOTHER'S GRAVE; THIS CAR ONLY HAS 31,000 MILES ON IT."

According to the Pharisees, that man is righteous whether what he said was true or not. Why? Because his oath didn't involve God. But according to Jesus, that man is unrighteous even if what he said was true. The very use of the oath itself makes Him unrighteous.

But why is that? What is the evil that oaths do that cause Jesus to condemn them absolutely and outright?

THE QUAKER INTERPRETATION

One of the great testimonies for which Quakers are famous is about oaths including the judicial oath. By judicial oath, I mean the one that we take in court. We raise our right hand and the bailiff asks, "DO YOU SWEAR TO TELL THE TRUTH, THE WHOLE TRUTH, AND NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH SO HELP YOU GOD?"

Quakers in 17th century England refused to do this and were horribly persecuted because of it. Many hundreds were imprisoned and some even killed because of their stand. But Parliament finally passed the Affirmation Act of 1696 allowing Quakers and others to affirm instead of swear that they're telling the truth. Our own laws today are based on that Act. All 50 states now allow individuals to affirm instead of swear in court.

William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania, explained why Quakers wouldn't take any oaths at all including the judicial oath: "PEOPLE SWEAR TO THE END THEY MAY SPEAK TRUTH; CHRIST WOULD HAVE THEM SPEAK TRUTH TO THE END THEY MIGHT NOT SWEAR."

The first line from paragraph 354 in our Book of Discipline articulates what Quakers believe about oaths: "THE NEW TESTAMENT (MATTHEW 5:33-37; JAMES 5:12) TEACH THAT FOR CHRISTIANS, THERE IS NO NEED TO SWEAR TO TELL THE TRUTH BUT RATHER THAT SPEAKING THE TRUTH SHOULD BE THEIR NORMAL, CONTINUING PRACTICE."

That really is how a lot of people interpret these verses. Kingdom people are truth tellers. They are good for their word and can be trusted. What they say is true and what they say they will do they do. But using oaths implies that there are times that what they say isn't true or that what they say they will do they don't do. It implies that they are sometimes not good for their word and can't be trusted. So, Christians should not use oaths and give this false impression.

MANIPULATION

But truth telling isn't the real issue that Jesus is getting at here. You can see that in verse 37. In verses 34-36, Jesus gives us the negative side of our behavior – we shouldn't use oaths. But in verse 37, He gives us the positive side of it – just say "yes" or "no" and nothing beyond that. Verse 37 is the key to correctly interpreting the passage.

Stop for a moment and consider what we're trying to do when we use oaths. What was my friend Curt trying to do by using the oath – get me to do something I didn't really want to do. What was the used car salesman trying to get me to do by using the oath – believe something that I was having trouble believing.

That helps us understand what oaths are. As Willard points out, they are devices for manipulating people. When I say "manipulating," I mean "using." Oaths are all about making use of people. They enable us to use them to get our own way. They make people think that we are sincere and reliable. They then believe what we want them to believe or do or give what we want them to do or give. They are devices for manipulation.

The dynamics of this are quite clear. Oaths are designed to override the judgment and will of those to whom they are spoken. We don't use them to inform people's mental processes. We use them to bypass their mental processes. Our goal in doing that is to make them feel instead of think. We get them to feel something and then act according to the feeling.

Let's go back to the two examples again. Curt wanted me to feel confident that I would get my money back and used the oath so that I would hopefully feel that way. The car salesman wanted me to feel trust for him and used the oath so that I would hopefully feel that way.

RESPECT PEOPLE!

Having told us what we shouldn't do in verses 34-36, Jesus then tells us what we should do in verse 37. He says that we should just say yes or no and nothing beyond that. James says the same thing in 5:12 of his book, "your yes is to be yes, and you no, no." Jesus and James are teaching us the same thing. People are born free and we need to respect that.

You can see that people are born free in Genesis 1-3. These chapters reveal that God human beings are free moral creatures. God has given all of us the leadership over our own lives. That means that He has given all of us both the ability and the freedom to make decisions.

Exercising that ability and freedom are vital biological and psychological needs that we have. We actually have the soul need to make our own judgments and decisions based upon what we have concluded is best.

Verse 37 shows us that kingdom people respect that need. They realize that the leadership over their own lives is vital to people and realizing that, always respect and support it. They allow and even encourage people to make their own decisions without being manipulated and coerced.

They do that by letting their yes be yes and there no be no. That means that they inform people's mental processes, not bypass or manipulate them. They reason with people and give them the facts. They make them think not feel in other words.

This issue of manipulation and respect arises more often and in more settings than most of us realize. You see, oaths is just one of many ways that we can manipulate people.

Remember when Kenneth Starr was investigating Bill Clinton, for instance. One of Clinton's spin doctors, James Carville, was on television talk shows comparing Starr to Adolph Hitler. Even if you despised Starr and his investigation, in reality he wasn't anything like Hitler. Carville's statements were emotionally laden and absurd. So why did he make them? It's simple really. Carville wasn't trying to inform people; he was trying to move them. He wasn't trying to make people think; he was trying to make them feel. It was a disgusting display and I personally have no use for someone who says things like that.

But people do that kind of thing all the time don't they. They exaggerate or use emotionally laden inaccurate words, good or bad, to bypass people's mental processes. You might call someone a "chicken" for example, or you might flatter them to get them to do something

Kingdom people do not do that kind of thing. They respect people instead and are careful to always go through their mental processes, not around them. They will inform but not manipulate.

This then is the fourth contrast. The righteousness of the Pharisees – do not make false oaths. The righteousness of the kingdom – make no oaths at all but respect and value people's freedom to make their own decisions.

Responding to Personal Injury **5:38-42**

We come now to the fifth contrast and what is one of the most pressing issues in our personal lives. How do we respond to those who injure us or impose on us?

FOUR SCENARIOS

Let's start with the four scenarios that Jesus gives us in verse 39-42. He pictures four different things happening to us.

The first thing is in verse 39. Someone slaps us on the cheek. This refers to the person who attempts to hurt us or sabotage our life in some way. A boss gave someone in our church an unfair work performance evaluation. That is verse 39.

The second thing that happens to us is in verse 40. Someone sues us and the case is still going on. I knew a Christian whose neighbor sued her in small claims court for damaging her fence. The Christian didn't do it though and had no idea why the neighbor thought she did.

The third thing is in verse 41. Someone forces us to do something. When one nation conquered and occupied another nation, the occupiers could compel or force people into their service for one reason or another. A person might be compelled to give lodging to a group of soldiers, for instance, or help them carry a load for a mile. Verse 41 is thus about people forcing us to do something.

The fourth thing that happens to us is in verse 42. Someone asks us for something to which they have no valid claim. I had a friend in Canton whose car was repossessed because he didn't make the payments on it. He then asked me to take him to an appointment in one of the Cleveland suburbs. He was asking me for my time and money because I knew he wouldn't pay for either the gas or turnpike tolls.

You can see then what these verses are about. They're about people injuring or imposing on us.

But how should we respond when they do? That's the compelling issue that arises the moment they do. There are two ways that people respond, both of which Jesus addresses in verses 38-42. Again, He is contrasting the righteousness of the Pharisees with the righteousness of the kingdom of God.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE PHARISEES

Verse 38 reveals the righteousness of the Pharisees. They believed in and taught an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. They quoted and totally misread Exodus 21:25; Leviticus 24:20; and Deuteronomy 19:21. The eye for an eye principle in the Old Testament governed the judicial process. God gave it to govern the punishment of individuals who were convicted of crimes. It meant that the punishment should fit the crime. But the Pharisees misread it and applied it to personal relationships.

They taught and practiced retaliation. They believed that we can injure wrongdoers as much as they injure us. But we can't injure them more than they injure us. Their ethic, in other words was this. Exact retaliation is righteousness. Excessive retaliation is unrighteousness.

A Christian had a co-worker who told lies about her to other co-workers to make her look bad. Apply the righteousness of the Pharisees to two hypothetical situations. #1 – the Christian tells comparable lies about her to co-workers to make her look bad. According to the Pharisees, the Christian is righteous because the retaliation is exact. #2 – the Christian tells lies about her to the boss that get her fired. According to the Pharisees, the Christian is unrighteous because the retaliation is excessive.

Now, there was something to be said for the righteousness of the Pharisees. It was a better approach than what most people in the ancient world and many in our world today live by. Remember the Hatfield's and McCoy's. Their feud demonstrates the way of the world. Injury is followed by counter injury, which is followed by counter injury and so on. At least with the Pharisees, if someone injures you, you inflict an equal injury and the matter stops. If the Hatfield's and McCoy's had followed the teachings of the Pharisees, there wouldn't have been an ongoing feud and we wouldn't even know their names.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE KINGDOM

Nevertheless, the righteousness of the Pharisees is not the righteousness of the kingdom of God. What Jesus teaches is a reversal. The reversal is probably more apparent here and in verses 43-48 than anywhere else in Scripture. Kingdom people, those who live in the flow of God's presence and power, behave differently than "normal" people like the Pharisees do.

That really is the crux of verses 39-42. These aren't four laws that Jesus is giving us. They are not laws of righteous behavior that govern when we're injured or imposed upon. To view them as such is to misinterpret them.

I've told you the story about a 19th century Quaker farmer named William Patterson. Patterson was very mild mannered and easily imposed upon. That's why a rental tenant was constantly cheating him on the terms of their contract. Finally, Patterson confronted the tenant who eventually hit him. He at once turned the other cheek and told him to strike again. Seeing no resistance, the tenant struck him again. Whereupon Patterson lit into and beat him up. The overseers of his church then had a meeting with him and chastised him for doing what he did. He protested though and defended himself. He told the overseers that he followed Jesus command to the letter. It says turn the other cheek, which he did, and from that point he simply did what he deemed best.

That shows us that verses 39-42 aren't laws. Jesus is just illustrating what a certain kind of person, a kingdom person, will characteristically do in situations like these. There may be times when what happens goes beyond an individual injury and there are other larger goods at stake. In those rare situations, the kingdom person will not do what is said here. But in the normal and usual circumstances of life, kingdom people do what is said here. Let's examine what that is.

Verse 39. They turn the other cheek. If a person injures them, not someone else but them, they allow themselves to be injured again rather than injure back.

Verse 40. They give their coat also. If someone takes something valuable of theirs in a lawsuit, they will, if they can, give him something else if he needs it.

Verse 41. They go the extra mile. If someone forces them to do something, they do even more if it's needed and they can.

Verse 42. They give. If a person asks them for something to which he or she has no claim, they gladly give it.

There's a common thread that runs through each of these verses and that is goodness. The way of the human order is retaliation. The way of the kingdom of God is goodness. The human order returns evil for evil. The kingdom of God returns good for evil.

Again, we do that appropriately of course. We take into account the wrongdoer, the circumstances, and the results of his actions. There may be times when we resist or oppose the wrongdoer. But we never do it as a matter of retaliation, because we're mad or want to get even. We always do it, when we do it, to promote the greater good of God, others, the wrongdoer, and ourselves.

The bottom line is that kingdom people always and naturally seek the good of everyone they encounter and deal with – including those who injure or impose on them.

GOODNESS TRANSFORMS

That is what kingdom people naturally do and believe me it's the best thing. You've all heard the old expression, "kill 'em with kindness." It should actually go this way, "kill 'em with goodness." The point is that goodness transforms our relationships with those who injure and impose on us.

The truth is that normal wrongdoers or imposers cannot resist kingdom goodness. It often wins them over and they end up changing. But even if they don't, goodness lets loose the forces of God's kingdom in the situation. That in turn redeems it and the people as much as they possibly can be. Returning good for evil instead of evil for evil always achieves better results.

The true story is told of a man who slandered and wronged an old deacon. This man kept it up until the deacon vowed that he would kill him. The more the man slandered and wronged him, the better the deacon treated him. Until one day, as fate, or I should say God, would have it, the deacon rescued his enemy's drowning wife. That was the straw that broke the camel's back and the man became the deacon's friend. He said in that regard: "YOU'VE DONE WHAT YOU SAID YOU WOULD. YOU KILLED ME – OR AT LEAST YOU KILLED THE MAN THAT I WAS."

SOMETHING THAT WE MUST DO

Now, there is something that we must do if we are going to respond with goodness. This something of course must take place in the context of practicing the spiritual disciplines and the presence of God. It is actually a spiritual discipline itself since we do it to be transformed.

That something is that we must develop a larger view of things. First, we must develop a larger view of our self in God's world. We need to see God and ourselves in His hands. Second, we must also develop a larger view of the wrongdoer or imposer. We need to see him as more than merely a person who has injured or impose on us. We need to recognize his humanity, his pitiful limitation, and his place under God.

This larger view does a powerful thing. It puts our injury or imposition in its place. It keeps it from becoming so big that we're preoccupied or obsessed with it. It keeps it from becoming our world. We're then able to bring goodness to the situation and simply get on with our lives.

Quite a few years ago, someone not from our church imposed on me. She and her husband couldn't afford an attorney and so asked me to do a dissolution for them since they hadn't lived together for years. I told them I would do it but that I would get to it only as I had the time. To make a long story short, they acted as if they were paying me to do this and were quite presumptive and demanding through the whole thing.

Having a larger view, in the context of a total life committed to Jesus, governs this situation of imposition. I didn't know what I've taught you tonight but if I had, this is how I would have applied it.

I would have had a larger view of myself in God's world. I would have focused on the fact that I am in His hands and that I can entrust my existence to Him. That in turn would have given me the confidence that the imposition would not injure or destroy me in any significant way.

I would also have had a larger view of the imposers. I would see them as the pitiful creatures that they were. I would think about them being people for whom Jesus died and having an eternal destiny. I would have prayed that all would be well with them

That would have been my view and it would have kept this imposition from being my world. I would have not been upset about their presumptiveness and certainly not bitter toward them. I would have had feelings of compassion and love for them instead and a feeling of gladness to help them no matter how unappreciative they were.

This then is the fifth contrast:

The righteousness of the Pharisees – do not retaliate excessively.
The righteousness of the Kingdom – do not retaliate at all but always return good for evil or imposition.

Responding to Enemies

5:43-47

The sixth contrast is found in verses 43-47. This contrast is about responding to our enemies.

The first thing that we need to do is define what an enemy is. It is a person or persons who hate us and have contempt for us.

Let's define that by illustrating it. Stop for a moment and think about our world and the individuals or groups in it who have enemies. I will list the individual or group who is hated first and the enemy second. It might be vice-versa as well in some cases but for illustration I'll just mention one side of the coin:

Yankees-Indians, Israel-PLO, Americans-Iraqi's, Christians-ACLU, Christians-Ted Turner, George Bush-David Corn, Jane Fonda-Viet Nam veterans, and so on.

The truth is that all of us at one time or another will have enemies in our lives. It is almost impossible if not impossible to have them. I like the way Willard articulates it, "FEW OF US MANAGE TO GO THROUGH LIFE WITHOUT COLLECTING A GROUP OF INDIVIDUALS WHO WOULD NOT BE SORRY TO LEARN THAT WE HAVE DIED."

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE PHARISEES

Jesus reveals the righteousness of the Pharisees regarding enemies in verse 43. They believed and taught that we should love our neighbors but hate our enemies. This was just an extension of the eye for an eye principle in verse 38. To dislike or hate those who dislike or hate us is righteousness. To dislike or hate those who like or love us is unrighteousness.

Let's apply that standard to a real life situation. A husband has a mother who is a devout Christian and a mother-in-law who is an atheist. According to the Pharisees, the mother hating her son's mother-in-law right back is righteousness because the mother-in-law hates her. But the mother hating her son's wife because of it is unrighteous because the wife loves her.

You can see then again that there is something to be said for the righteousness of the Pharisees. Some people do hate those who love them and the righteousness of the Pharisees would prohibit this at least.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE KINGDOM

The righteousness of the kingdom stands in sharp contrast to the righteousness of the Pharisees. Jesus says in verse 44 that those who have kingdom hearts love their enemies and pray for them.

Let me ask you a question? Why does Jesus connect love and prayer? What does prayer have to do with love? The answer is that praying for people is the greatest act of love. If we truly love someone, we desire more for them than it is in our power to give. So we pray for them and ask God to give them good things that we cannot. Prayer then is our best way of loving others. That is why Jesus commands us to pray for our enemies.

The Bible contains the two greatest demonstrations of love for enemies through prayer that I know of. The first was when Jesus prayed for those who crucified him, "FATHER, FORGIVE THEM FOR THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO." The second was in Acts 7:60 when Stephen prayed for the men who were stoning him to death, "LORD, DO NOT HOLD THIS SIN AGAINST THEM." Talk about loving your enemies, those who hate you, that is it.

Those two prayers clarify what Jesus is really saying in verse 44. Listen to this because it is radical. Love your enemies and lavish honor and care upon them. That is kingdom righteousness.

I was reading about a group of radical feminists picketing outside a Christian counseling center that offered alternatives to abortion. These feminists were an absolutely hostile group that the hated the Christians inside and were trying the best they could do to sabotage their efforts. Imagine how stunned these picketers were when the Christians they hated came out to them with trays of donuts and coffee. What they didn't know was that these same Christians had also prayed together for them.

In verse 45, Jesus uncovers one of the reasons that we should do this. He comments that God causes His sun to shine and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust – on both His enemies and His friends in other words. Verse 45 has a companion verse, Proverbs 29:13. The Lord gives light to the eyes of the good and the bad. The point is that Father God blesses His enemies and so should we.

Jesus closes out His discussion of enemies in dramatic fashion. He mentions tax collectors and Gentiles in verses 46-47. First century Jews considered tax collectors and Gentiles to be the lowest and most despicable members of humanity. The equivalent for us would be the Mafia and terrorists. We might even lump in with them the Nazi doctors or even the Nazi inner circle. In mentioning these people, Jesus is referring to those who have absolutely no knowledge or experience of God at all – people whom we would say are morally depraved.

But notice what he says about them. Even these people with no knowledge or experience of God love and favor those who love them. So, it's no big deal, it's no sign of the kingdom, if you do the same.

Those last two verses reveal just how sharp the contrast is between the righteousness of the Pharisees and the righteousness of the kingdom of God. The contrast is this:
The righteousness of the Pharisees: love those who love you and hate those who hate you.
The righteousness of the kingdom: love those who hate you; lavish honor and care upon them.

Be Perfect as God Is Perfect

5:48

Jesus closes out the first section of His sermon – the six contrasts with one of the most significant statements in the entire Bible. He declares in verse 48, "THEREFORE YOU ARE TO BE PERFECT AS YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER IS PERFECT."

I asked you to study this verse and figure out what it means. Remembering that context is one of the keys to interpretation, what is Jesus saying here? Can we actually be perfect as God is perfect?

Jesus is not saying that we should be metaphysically perfect just as God is perfect. It is impossible for human beings to be perfect in all aspects of personality and being like God is. What Francis Schaeffer wrote rings true. When we demand of people perfection or nothing, we always get nothing.

You can see that the interpretation of verse 48 hinges on the meaning of the Greek word translated "perfect." The word is "telios," which is used in the Greek in a special way. It is not about absolute metaphysical perfection as I've just said. The Greeks used it, for example, to describe a student who had reached a mature knowledge of his subject.

William Barclay, an expert in the koine Greek in which the New Testament was written, explains the word's meaning as well as it can be. He says the word refers to something that is functional. A thing is telios if it realizes the purpose for which it was planned, made, and designed.

I can illustrate this with a screwdriver. I attempted to change the headlight in my car one time and found that the screws had special grooves in the heads. Neither a Phillips screwdriver or the regular straight line would work. So I had to go out and buy a screwdriver that was made for those grooves.

The Greeks would say that the Phillips and straight line screwdrivers were not telios and that the one I bought was. The one I bought was telios because it realized the purpose for which it was made.

That helps us understand what it means that human beings are perfect. It means that we achieve the purpose or plan for which we were created and in our case also redeemed. That purpose or plan of course is that we become the kind of people and live the kind of life that Jesus has just described in verses 21-47.

When we don't get angry at people but value them, don't lust but are sexually right before God, don't throw people away but love them, don't manipulate them but respect their freedom, return injury or imposition with good, and love our enemies, then we are telios or functional.

By living in the presence and power of God, we are what we were made to be, kingdom people, and are living the way we were made to live, joyfully and well. We functional just as our heavenly Father is functional.

Just as He functions consistently with all that He can be, so we function consistently with all that we can be.

Verse 48 is the fitting conclusion to this first section because of what it clearly implies. Notice it is about "being" something.

Verse 48 implies that we are not to make doing these six things the goal of our lives. I say that because you and I in our natural and normal state cannot do them. Bertrand Russell was one of the most well known philosophers of the 20th century. He later turned to atheism and I want you to listen to what he said: "THE CHRISTIAN PRINCIPLE 'LOVE YOUR ENEMIES' IS GOOD . . . THERE IS NOTHING TO BE SAID AGAINST IT EXCEPT THAT IS IT TOO DIFFICULT FOR MOST OF US TO PRACTICE SINCERELY."

Russell was right. That helps explain the error of the Pharisees. Their error was legalism, that is, committing themselves to doing certain behaviors.

Jesus had a different approach. He didn't teach people to commit themselves to certain behaviors. He taught them to commit themselves to becoming the kind of person for whom those behaviors are natural.

Our goal shouldn't be keeping all the commandments that God gives us in the Bible. Our goal should be becoming the kind of person who automatically and naturally keeps them.

We do this by learning the things that the first and third parts of this trilogy teach and then doing them. The Holy Spirit will transform us into functional people as we do.

SUMMARY

We have now finished the first part of the body of Jesus' sermon. Let's do a quick review to see where we are.

5:3-12. The beatitudes are the introduction to the sermon. Jesus begins it by telling his audience and us that the kingdom of God is open to everyone including grubby people and that they will be blessed, will live a life of well being and joy, if they enter it.

5:13-16. Jesus declares that it is kingdom people who make the world work, who make life manageable.

5:17-19. Jesus makes clear that God's law is good and right and is part of the kingdom life. It is a picture of reality that assists in knowing how to live well.

5:20. This verse is a transition from the introduction of the sermon to the main body of it. It reveals that God's law is the course of rightness but not the source. The kingdom isn't about what we do, as the Pharisees contend, but about what we are – a righteous person. We are to become a righteous person from whom a righteous life just naturally flows. Jesus explains what kind of person and life that is by contrasting the righteousness of the Pharisees with the righteousness of the kingdom.

5:21-47. Jesus contrasts the righteousness of the Pharisees with the righteousness of the kingdom in six different contexts.

5:48. Jesus closes out the first part of the body of His sermon by making clear that what he has said is about a state of being. Those who are functional like God is just naturally do or don't do the things He has discussed.

Playing to an Audience of One

6:1-18

Jesus now moves on to a new topic. You can see that there are no more contrasts. With verse 6:1, Jesus begins discussing two things that keep us out of the flow of God's presence and power, that keep us from being blessed, that keep us from being the kind of person that He previously described. Let's take a look at these two things that undermine our spirituality and power.

The first of those things, in 6:1-18, is playing to an audience of many. That means that we desire and seek out the praise and approval of people. Our concern here is building our reputation.

PRACTICING RIGHTEOUSNESS BEFORE MEN

Let's start off with verse 1 and the phrase, "practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them."

One of my favorite lines in all of literature is found in the play *As You Like It* by William Shakespeare. In that play, the character Jacques says: "ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE, AND ALL MEN AND WOMEN MERELY PLAYERS. THEY HAVE THEIR EXITS AND THEIR ENTRANCES, AND ONE MAN IN HIS TIME PLAYS MANY PARTS."

That is a good metaphorical description of our lives isn't? It is true that we are actors and we do play many different parts in all the different contexts and through all the different phases of our lives. Name some of the parts that you play – spouse, parent, professional person, worker, church member, board member, neighbor, friend, and so on.

It is also true that we have an audience as we play all of these parts. There are those who are watching and observing us and how we are living our lives. On the one hand, we have a human audience. Our spouses, children, parents, fellow Christians, co-workers, neighbors, and so on are watching us closely. On the other hand, we have a divine audience. God is watching us closely.

Listen as a person reads each of the following passages. Then interpret for me what each is teaching us.

Psalms 56:8 and Matthew 10:29-30. The first verse is about tears and the second verses are about the hairs of our head. They teach us that nothing on earth is too small to matter to heaven. God notices literally every detail in our personal lives.

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14; Luke 8:16-18; Luke 12:1-5; Romans 2:16; and 1 Corinthians 4:5. These verses add a new insight. Not only does God notice every detail of our lives; He also assesses each one for the purpose of judgment.

Putting all of this together, we find that we do have an audience that is watching us as we live this one life that God has given us. There is an audience of many, human beings, and there is an audience of One, God.

That assists us in understanding the general statement of verse 1. Do not practice your righteousness before men to be noticed by them.

Look at the phrase, "to be noticed by men." That phrase is about the intent with which people do things. By intent I mean what they want or expect from their actions. In this case, people are doing things with the intent that others will notice what they are doing and then praise or reward them. Whether this is their primary or secondary motivation, this is called "playing to an audience of many."

Playing to an audience of many is the way of the world. Remember 1 John 2:16 and the three characteristics of the world. The boastful pride of life is simply playing to an audience of many. There isn't anything more common in everyday life than this. There isn't anything more common than people tooting their own horns. Examples of it are legion.

Let's stop for a moment and consider why institutions put plaques with the names of their contributors on the walls of their buildings or why if they're huge contributors, they actually name buildings after them. One of the reasons is to express the institution's gratitude and there certainly isn't anything wrong with that. But the biggest reason, according to fundraisers, is that people are more likely to give if they know their name is going to be on a plaque.

Then there are all the titles that people insist on being called. I knew a senior minister who had a Ph.D. degree and insisted that all of his staff members use "doctor" before his name.

Then there are pastors who insist on being called reverend. A couple of weeks ago, someone told me about going to a service at another church. She met the minister of the church and called him "pastor." He immediately corrected her and told her that a "reverend" and a "pastor" are two different things. He also told her that he is a reverend and should be called that. I don't know what the distinction is but it must be a pretty important one for him to correct a perfect stranger about it. I'm being facetious of course.

Finally, there are all of those vanity plates that people use on their cars. Not all of them are a matter of "vanity" but many of them are. Some physicians, for instance, put "MD" on their plates. They want people to know that they are medical doctors. Maybe there is a practical reason for that I'm not familiar with. If not, it is simply a form of bragging.

What I'm trying to say is that people seem to have a desperate need to be recognized, praised, and rewarded. And they go to great lengths to make sure that they are. That is what Jesus meant when he says "to be noticed by men."

Now look at the phrase, "practicing your righteousness." Jesus is saying that this playing to an audience of many is especially desirable to people when it comes to righteousness.

It seems that we especially want people to know how godly we are. So we do godly things so that they will.

Again we see that this is a matter of intent, whether it's primary or secondary. We do something so that people will think or believe that we are righteous and godly people.

YOUR FATHER WHO SEES

We now know what we should not do – play to an audience of many. So let's look at what we should do. There is a key phrase in verses 4, 6, and 18 that shows us. That phrase is "your Father who sees."

Oz Guinness coined a phrase that I just love and that I have shared with you many times. He said that the Puritans who came to America played to an audience of One, capital "O." That One of course is God. That is what Jesus calls us to do here. Play to an audience of One, capital "O."

Notice the words that Jesus uses to make this point, "in secret." Jesus speaks these words in verses 4, 6, and 18.

Some people misunderstand what Jesus is teaching here. They take Him to mean that we should hide our good deeds. That might be appropriate in some cases but that is not what Jesus is teaching here. There is nothing wrong with what we do or accomplish being known.

Instead, Jesus uses the words "in secret" to emphasize intent. It is the intent with which we do things that matters.

To play to an audience of One means to do things because we care what God thinks. To play to an audience of many means to do things because we care about what people think. To play to an audience of One means to do things because we care what God thinks. We love Him and desire to please Him and so we care about what He thinks.

Colossians 3:22-24 expresses this so well. Paul is writing to slaves who are subject by law to their masters. In that situation, it would certainly be tempting for them to do what they do to please their masters and get their praise and reward. But Paul commands them to not do anything to please their masters. He commands them instead to do their work heartily as for the Lord rather than for men.

The punch line of that passage is this. If slaves are to do this, in their most extreme of circumstances, how much more should we do it in our circumstances whatever they may be.

So that is our call. Live unto the Lord alone. That means two things. #1 – do everything that you do for Him. And #2 – do everything as He would have you do it.

No one exemplified this kingdom spirit like Mother Teresa did. One day a Brother of Charity told her that his vocation was to work with lepers. Whereupon she looked at him and gently said: "I THINK YOU ARE SOMEWHAT WRONG, BROTHER. OUR VOCATION CONSISTS IN BELONGING TO JESUS. THE WORK FOR LEPERS IS NOTHING BUT A MEANS TO EXPRESS OUR LOVE FOR HIM."

To play to an audience of One then means that God is our primary motivation for doing things.

Suppose I decide to become an attorney for one of the following reasons. Tell me with each reason if I am playing to an audience of One, "yes" or "no": to please my parents and make them proud; to gain status and have respect; to be an advocate for the poor; to serve God by being an advocate for the poor.

My greatest area of personal growth has taken place in this context. For most of my life, I was driven by the desire that people would respect me and hold me in high regard. But now, I don't desire that at all. I really don't. I only desire to please God. I quit playing to an audience of many and started playing to an audience of One.

THE REWARD – THE PRAISE OF PEOPLE

We now know that there are two reasons to do thing. One is to be noticed by people. The other is to be noticed by God. Let's look now at the results of that.

Jesus reveals the results of playing to an audience of many in verses 2, 5, and 16. Notice the words, "they have their reward in full."

When you and I do things to get praise or reward from people, we may get it. But that is all that we will get. All we will get is the praise or reward that people give us.

The implication of that is profound. We will get nothing from God. Please grasp that. When we do things to get praise or reward from people, we get nothing from God.

There is a primary reason for that. It is because God usually isn't present where He isn't wanted. God has a lot of wonderful qualities and one of those is that he is courteous. He doesn't like to be present where He isn't wanted and usually won't be.

Well, when we play to an audience of many, He knows He isn't wanted and so doesn't usually intrude. When our aim is to impress others and get their approval, He simply steps aside like the gentleman He is and let's us do that. He responds to our expectation and since what we expect is from others, that is exactly what He lets us have – what others can give.

That is what Jesus means when He says, "They have their reward in full." They are seeking a response from people and so they get that – a response from people. They are not seeking a response from God and so do not get that – a response from God.

I spoke at a chapel service at Malone College years ago. What I wanted to do was impress my former professors. I don't know if I did or not but if I did that is all that I got. I didn't get anything from God.

The problem is that what we get from people, their admiration, praise, or reward isn't much. We need to be realistic about this and realize two things. #1 – people have their own lives and aren't going to give you and me much thought no matter what we do. And #2 – each person that we are trying to impress will one day be dead and as Ecclesiastes tells us, have no memory of us.

GOD'S REWARD

Now let's examine the results of playing to an audience of One. Jesus reveals what that is in verses 4, 6, and 18. Notice the commonality in these verses. Verse 4 – "so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you." Verse 6 – "pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you." And finally verse 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 meaning of these verses hinges on our interpretation of the words "in secret." Some take that to mean that we should do things so that others don't see us doing them.

That is what my wife's home church, Goss Memorial in Akron, taught her as she was growing up. Her teachers taught that if others see what we do and praise us, we lose our reward from God. They equated doing something "in secret" in other words with people not seeing us do it.

But they were mistaken. The fact is that we can do things "in secret" even though others are watching.

"In secret" refers to the intent with which we do things, not their privacy. Something is in secret if I am doing it to please God and not people. This does mean as a practical matter, however, that people will often not know we are doing.

When we do things in secret, to please God, verses 4, 6, and 18 tell us what will happen. God will reward us.

But what does Jesus mean by that? What is the reward or the rewards that God gives us?

Remember when I said that God responds to our expectations. When our expectations are of Him alone, that is what He gives us – Himself. God knows that He is wanted because we are doing it unto Him. So He injects Himself into what we are doing. We end up doing it in partnership with Him.

Because we are, He makes His presence and power available to us. We find ourselves living within the flow of His kingdom. That means in the flow of His presence and of the powers of the age to

The result is enhancement and transformation. God's presence and power enhances what we do and causes results that are beyond our ability to achieve. His presence and power also transform what we are in the core of our being. It actually increases the kingdom nature of our hearts. So those are the rewards of doing what we do in secret, playing to an audience of One – enhancement and transformation.

Dwight L. Moody was one of the most successful evangelists in human history. His achievements for the cause of Christ were extraordinary. But he himself was not. He was a man of ordinary appearance, unordained by any ecclesiastical group, quite uncultured and uneducated, and to many crude and uncouth.

At the height of his effectiveness, between 1874 and 1875, Dr. R. W. Dale, one of the leading clergymen of England, carefully observed his work in Birmingham for four days. He did so to discover the secret of his effectiveness and power.

After his observations were complete, he told Moody that his work was most plainly the work of God. It was that he said, because he could see no relation between him personally and what he was accomplishing. Moody wasn't offended by that but laughed and commented that he would be very sorry if things were otherwise.

My point is that Moody played to an audience of One in his ministry. God in turn partnered with Him in it and brought about results that were incongruent with his own personal abilities and qualities. He achieved far more than his abilities and qualities, unenhanced by God, would have allowed him to.

But God's rewards aren't just enhancement and transformation now. They are power and authority forever in heaven. We must not separate Jesus' teaching here from our judgment and eternal life. Doing things in secret, playing to an audience of One, enable Jesus to give us more power and authority in our life in heaven.

You can clearly see the advantage of God's reward over the reward of people. The praise and reward of people is quite innocuous and brief. The praise and reward of God is life altering and eternal.

TRANSITION

That then is what verses 1-18 are generally about. Having the right motivation in the commendable things that we do. We should have this right motivation in all the commendable things that we do, including righteous or spiritual things.

That is what verses 2-28 are about. Jesus gives us three illustrations of righteous things and tells us that we should play to an audience of One not many when we do them. Let's examine each of these righteous things.

GIVING TO THE NEEDY (Verses 1-4)

The first illustration of righteous deeds is found in verses 2-4. These verses are about what the KJV translates "alms." Are any of you familiar with the English word "eleemosynary?" It means have the nature of a charitable organization or institution. This English word is derived from the Greek words translated "alms" in these verses.

That assists us in understanding what Jesus is discussing here - doing or giving things to meet people's needs. He is discussing philanthropic acts that offer relief to the needy.

According to Jesus, it is hypocrites who do many of these acts. Define for me what a hypocrite is. The Greek word translated "hypocrite" in verse 2 is "upokritai." This is the Greek words from which we get the English word "hypocrite."

There is something that we need to grasp about the Greek word in order to comprehend its meaning. Before Jesus used it, it didn't have the moral content that it does now.

It referred to an actor in a play. The culture of Jesus' day had numerous fine theatres, one of which was only several miles from His hometown of Nazareth. This word was used of actors in those theatres.

It did come to acquire somewhat of a moral meaning by the time of Jesus. It referred to someone who practices deceit.

But Jesus gave the word a much deeper moral content. Literary records show that it was His teachings that brought this word and its meaning into the morality of the Western world. That meaning is a person who is one way on the inside and another way on the outside. It is a person who presents one face to the world by his actions and another face to God in his or her inner person.

This definition illumines Jesus' unique emphasis on the condition of our innermost being. Our inner condition and not our actions is who we really are. No one ever emphasized this like Jesus did. It isn't what we do that defines us but what we are.

That explains what Jesus says about these hypocrites in verse 2. They blow trumpets to announce the good deeds they've done. They do that so that people will know what they've done and then think highly of them or praise them for it.

These people are hypocrites because of the contrast between what they do and what they are. They show love for others on the outside but there is only love for them selves on the inside.

People are still the same aren't they? People today may not actually blow horns like these Pharisees did but they do equivalent things.

I talked about fundraising earlier. People can contribute to the facility needs of institutions like hospitals or colleges in one of two ways: give money for buildings or endow the maintenance on buildings. Fundraisers will tell you it is much easier to get donations for building than for maintenance. The reason is that the building can be named after the donor or at least their name put on a plaque on the building. But it more difficult to recognize people for donating to maintenance. It is more difficult to put people's names on a broom or mop than on a building.

So whether it's a 1st century Israelite or a 21st century American, people who do good deeds for praise are hypocrites. What they show on the outside is not what is on the inside. The outside shows love for others when what is on the inside is primarily love for self.

Having told us what we should not be the case in verse 2, Jesus then tells us what we what should be the case in verse 3. When we give or do things for the needy, our left hand shouldn't know what our right hand is doing.

Let me define what He means by illustrating it. When my son Aaron was in gymnastics as a child and teenager, we used to stuff envelopes to raise funds for the cost of it. Most stuffing's had three, four, or five steps and the paper and products had to face a certain way in each step. During the first 30 or 40, my left hand knew what my right hand was doing because I was thinking about how to move my hand through the steps. But through sheer repetition, my hand motions became natural and automatic to me. I no longer had to think about how to move my hands. My hands did the motions because they "knew" how to. At that point, my left hand didn't know what my right hand was doing and so on because I wasn't even conscious of the movements.

That illustrates what I believe is the very point of this verse. Jesus is calling us to be the kind of person who just naturally does good deeds for others. To have the kind of character from which good deeds just naturally and automatically flow.

They are so natural and automatic in fact that we hardly notice or remember our own good deed. We are so absorbed in love for God and others that the deed we're doing took hardly any reflection or thought on our part.

This interpretation is consistent with what I've been saying over and over again about the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus isn't commanding us to do things like meeting the needs of others. He is commanding us to become the kind of people for doing that is natural and normal. So natural and normal that other people noticing or not noticing them doesn't even cross our minds.

We have someone in our group tonight that is like that. I won't say her name because I don't want to embarrass her. She has what I call the impulse of giving. She is constantly giving things to people. I think it's because she can't really help herself. Giving is as natural to her as breathing is. There is no thought of praise or reward even from God when she gives.

Moving on to verse 4, Jesus communicates what happens when we give things to the needy "in secret." Our heavenly Father rewards us.

I have already commented in detail about this but will quickly apply it to the context of verses 2-4. The reward for playing to an audience of One when we give to others is the fellowship of the One. We will experience the fellowship of God and see Him multiply the effects of our good deeds and giving.

We have now finished the first illustration that Jesus gives about playing to an audience of One. Remember the principle – we can play to an audience of One or an audience of many. The first illustration is giving. May we become the kind of person for whom giving and doing good deeds is our natural impulse. The kind of person who gives no thought at all to whether or not people notice what we give or do.

PRAYING (verses 5-6)

Jesus gives us a second illustration in verses 5-6. We must play to an audience of One not many when we pray.

The first thing that Jesus discusses here, in verse 5, is how the hypocrites pray. Notice that they stand and pray in the synagogues and the street corners. They pray in public in other words so that everyone can see and hear them.

Onlookers are quite impressed aren't they? These hypocrites seem to be devout people who are committed to prayer. But the outer reality doesn't reflect the inner. Their prayers have nothing to do with prayer or even God. They have to do with the hypocrites themselves and what others think of them.

There is a vital lesson here for us all. We must not regard the human context when we pray.

I think of the countless times that I did that. I did it when I was in a church service or small group and was asked to pray or had to pray. The same kind of dynamics that we see here in verse 4 were at work in the prayers I prayed.

My problem was that I was aware of the people who were hearing my prayers and that awareness conditioned and even drove my prayers. I was quite conscious of how they perceived my prayers and I tried to pray in a way that sounded good to them. Even though I may not have volunteered to pray, it was on my mind to impress the people who heard me.

That is one way that we can regard the human context when we pray. We are concerned about how our public prayers sound to the people who hear them.

There is a second way. That is by being concerned how we will look to others if God doesn't answer our prayer. We worry that people might think that we aren't very spiritual if the prayer isn't answered.

Early on in my ministry, I used to have this concern when I prayed for sick people to be healed. If they aren't healed, I thought, it will make people think that I'm an impotent pray-er.

A third way to regard the human context is to be concerned with impressing God as we pray. Even this is a human context because our ego not God is on our mind. Our prayer is about us and not about Him and what He can do.

That then is what Jesus tells us to not do in verse 5. Do not play to an audience of many, do not regard the human context, when you pray.

Having explained how we shouldn't pray, Jesus then proceeds to explain how we should in verse 6. We should go into our inner room, close the door, and pray to God in secret.

This is the verse from which we get the term “prayer closet.” We say that we should go to a quiet place alone and spend time in prayer.

Jesus is saying that kingdom people aren’t concerned about praying in public. They are just as content to disappear from sight and pray alone with God.

The thrust of this verse is the intent of the people who are praying. You can see that kingdom people are totally indifferent to what people know or think about their praying. They don’t care if people know or don’t know that they are praying. If people do know that they are praying, they don’t care if those people are impressed or not by their prayers. They also don’t care how it will look to others if their prayers are answered or not answered.

The contrast between the prayers of hypocrites and kingdom people then is a sharp one. Hypocrites are concerned about and aware of promoting themselves and building their egos. Kingdom people are only concerned about and aware of reaching God.

Not only is this nature of their prayers different, so is their reward.

According to verse 5, the hypocrites have their reward in full. They get the praise of people but that is all they get. Listen carefully to this. Their praying is only an event in the visible world. That in turn makes them powerless, ineffective and weak.

But according to verse 6, God rewards the prayers of kingdom people. That simply means that their praying is not an event in the visible world. It is an event in the invisible spiritual world where God’s presence is available to us. That in turn makes them powerful, effective, and strong.

We can conclude from all of this that the place of our prayer isn’t the decisive factor – whether we are in a public or private place. The decisive factor is our intent. Are we playing to an audience of One or many?

ELABORATING ON PRAYING (verses 7-8)

Instead of moving on to a third illustration, Jesus elaborates on prayer beginning in verse 7. It is so critical to our spiritual lives that He tells us several things that we need to know about it.

Jesus mentions the Gentiles in verses 7 and 8. The Gentiles is a term that He uses for those who do not understand God. It refers to those who are spiritually bankrupt people and don't grasp the true nature of God's kingdom at all.

These Gentiles believed that repeating the right words over and over again in prayer would guarantee the desired effect from God. That repeating the right words over and over again would get God to do what they wanted Him to do.

Jesus condemns that belief because it turns prayer into a mechanical process. That truly is condemnatory because if there is one thing that prayer is not it's that, a mechanical process.

Many new converts don't understand that, do they? They think that they have to use the right words or God won't hear their prayers.

A new convert who didn't have any Christian background one told me that he was really struggling with his prayer life because he didn't know how to pray. He told me that he didn't know the right words to use and asked me if I could teach him. I said, "No, because there aren't any right words." That is the very point that Jesus is making here.

That point speaks to a belief that many established Christians have. They believe that it's important to tack on the words "in the name of Jesus" at the end of our prayers.

I grew up believing that. I believed that if I used the formula "in the name of Jesus" my prayer would be a good one. That God would answer it and do what I wanted Him to do. I believed that there was something mystical, powerful about just using and repeating those words.

But that isn't true. Just tacking on the word "in the name of Jesus" to the end of a prayer isn't going to make it more effectual than it already is.

I say all of that to say this. There aren't any right words or phrases that we have to use in prayer. That is because prayer is not a mechanical process. How effective our prayers are doesn't have anything to do with what is on the outside – our words. What it does have to do with is what is on the inside – our hearts and minds. It is a motivated heart that makes our prayers effective. It is praying intelligently and eagerly.

You might think that praying intelligently and eagerly is a difficult thing to do but it isn't really because of what prayer is. If we have a familiar friendship with God, we have a relationship with Him that is mutual. By that I mean that we have mutual objectives and concerns. Prayer is nothing more than coming into the flow of God's action and life and talking honestly and openly about those objectives and concerns. In that kind of context, it isn't hard to pray intelligently and eagerly. We simply talk with God about what is on our mind and heart.

Let me ask you a question in that regard. What are some of the things that you have talked with God about?

Here are samples of my own conversations with God. My son Aaron is 26 years old and single. God and I want him to either remain single or marry someone with a kingdom heart. So, we talk about that.

I believe that the Sermon on the Mount is the single most important passage in the Bible. God and I want you to be personally and powerfully transformed through it. So, we talk about that.

I learned about some Sudanese refugees in Uganda and got upset with God for allowing their misery. I didn't want to be upset and God doesn't allow that in my relationship with Him. So I talked with Him about it.

What I'm trying to illustrate is that prayer is not a mechanical process. It isn't a process for manipulating God and getting what we want. It is you and I honestly and openly talking over matters of mutual concern with Him.

THE LORD'S PRAYER (Verses 9-15)

Having told us how we shouldn't pray in verses 5-8, Jesus then tells us how to pray in verses 9-13. This is without doubt the most remarkable and famous prayer that has ever been prayed.

It is normally called "The Lord's Prayer" because Jesus Himself prayed it but that isn't really accurate. That designation goes to the high priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17. John 17 is the Lord's Prayer. This passage, verses 9-13, should be called "The Disciples' Prayer."

Luke 11:1-4 explains why I say that. The disciples saw Jesus praying and when He finished asked, "LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY JUST AS JOHN ALSO TAUGHT HIS DISCIPLES." They were asking Him to induct them into the practice of powerful prayer. He did just that by teaching them and us essentially the same prayer that we see here in verses 9-13. That is why it is better called The Disciples' Prayer.

Because it is our prayer, we must take it infinitely seriously. In fact, the only way that we can progress in learning how to pray is to understand and use it. Using it doesn't mean just mechanically repeating it word for word. We'd be violating verses 7-8 if we did that. It just means that we should stay within its principles.

That is what this prayer is all about in my opinion – principles of effective prayer presented in almost outline form. These principles teach us how to talk lovingly and intelligently to God. Let's take a close look at each one as Jesus presents it to us.

OUR FATHER WHO IS IN HEAVEN

Let's start with the opening words of verse 9, "Our Father." This is what Dallas Willard calls "the address" part of prayer.

The address part of prayer is vital. We should not neglect it. Each and every prayer that we pray should begin with you and me addressing God. This does two things.

First, as Willard points out, it distinguishes praying from worrying.

You and I almost always address people when we speak to them. We don't say "hey you" but call them by name. Doing that indicates that we wish to speak to them.

It's the same with in prayer. Addressing God indicates that we wish to speak to Him. That is important because it is one of the things that separates praying from worrying.

I was washing dishes one night about a week before I took the bar exam. I was thinking about the gravity of it all and said under my breath, "If I don't pass this bar exam, I'm going to be humiliated and bankrupt." Jill, who was in the living room, heard me mumbling and asked, "Are you talking to yourself?" To which I replied, "No, I'm praying."

But I wasn't was I? I wasn't praying; I was worrying out loud. And there's a big difference between the two. Many people worry silently or out loud and confuse that with prayer.

But the confusion is cleared up when we address God. He and we both know now that we're praying, not worrying.

Addressing God does a second thing. It establishes the context in which we're relating to Him.

That's true in our human relationships isn't it? How we address people conditions what happens and is said after that. That is especially true if the relationship is an intimate one.

My wife, for instance, can call me "Sweetie" or "Bob," which you know that I don't like. Which one she calls me conditions what happens and is said after that. I know that what happens after "sweetie" is usually a whole lot more pleasant than what happens after "Bob."

It's the same way with God. The address establishes the context and tone of our conversation with Him.

Let's stop for a moment and list some of the names or titles that we can use to address God. The list would include names and titles like the following: Father, Daddy, Almighty God, Sweet Jesus, "my everlasting Lover," "my love, my honey, my harp," my familiar Friend, my rock and shield, and so on.

Well, which of these addresses we use establishes the context and tone of our conversation with Him. If we are repenting, for instance, we might address Him as Savior. If things aren't going well and we're frustrated – Father or Daddy. If we're grateful for something – Jehovah Jireh. If we need a miracle, Almighty Creator. If we want to be intimate with Him – my everlasting Lover. And so on.

We can improve our prayer life by compiling a list of names and titles for God. We can do this by studying the Bible, Christian literature, and hymns. Once we do that, we can use these names and titles in our prayer life.

I took one of my favorite designations for God from a hymn written by Charles Wesley. That designation is "Jesus, lover of my soul." I use it frequently now. I will also probably use it when I'm dying. Jesus, lover of my soul, let me to thy bosom fly.

WHO IS IN HEAVEN

The address part of The Disciples' Prayer has a second part – who is in heaven or as the KJV says it, "which art in heaven."

Notice that the word "heaven" is singular in the KJV and my Bible. I checked six other translations and they also use the word "heaven." That is not the correct translation of the Greek word however. The Greek word is plural. Consequently, it should be "Our Father, who is in the heavens."

That is important to know. A lot of people, including many Christians, think of heaven as being way out there someplace. So, "Our Father, who is in heaven" means "Our Father who is way out there someplace." That is a genuine problem because we cannot effectively pray if we think that.

But the Greek word again is plural not singular. It is "heavens" not "heaven." The Jews believed that there were seven different heavens. These ranged all the way from the seventh heaven, furthest from us, to the first heaven, nearest us. This first heaven, in fact, was the space immediately surrounding us.

Notice what this phrase tells us. God is in all of these heavens including the first one. "Who is in the heavens" therefore means "who is very near us." A good translation would be "Our Father, the one who is face to face with us." That is what Jesus is saying here.

Those two parts of the address, "our Father" and "who is in the heavens," reveal a vital thing. It actually matters how we approach prayer. The best prayer occurs when we properly orient ourselves before God. When we fix our minds on Him and establish His presence with us.

Martin Luther called what I'm talking about "warming up the heart" for prayer. You know how we warm up before we exercise or play games. We don't go out and start running, for instance, without stretching or warming up. We should do the same with prayer. We should warm up for it.

There are many ways to do this. Luther suggested using Scripture. He said those who are well trained in warming up the heart for prayer will "BE ABLE TO USE A CHAPTER OF SCRIPTURE AS A LIGHTER." I personally think it doesn't have to be a whole chapter. It might be a verse, collection of verses, or passage.

Can you think of any verses, passages, or chapters that might be good warm-ups for prayers? I can think of many including Psalm 29, Habakkuk 3:17-19, Acts 17:24-28; Romans 8:31-39; Revelation 5:8-14.

But we can also warm-up for prayer by reading or singing great hymns or choruses or using the written prayers of those who knew or know God the best.

We ourselves can develop our own ways to warm up for prayer. One of the things that I often do, for instance, is this. I think of some aspect of the created world – the makeup of atoms, the complexity of the body, or the vastness of space, for instance. I then think of God as the conceiver, maker, and sustainer of all of those things. My mind is boggled and believe me I am ready to pray.

Another thing I do, almost all of the time in fact, is actually focus on the second part of the address here, “who is in the heavens.” I concentrate on the meaning of that. That God’s presence literally fills the space surrounding my body. That He Himself is literally face to face with me. I sometimes even reach my hand in front of my face and think “God is closer to me than my hand is.” It is an absolutely overwhelming thing. It makes His presence vivid and real to me and believe me, I’m ready to pray.

I think you get what I’m trying to say. It really does matter how we approach prayer. We need to warm up our minds and hearts for prayer. We need to fix our minds on God and establish His tripping presence with us. It makes our prayer life more effective when we do.

HALLOWED BY YOUR NAME

Having taught us to address God and warm up for prayer, Jesus moves on to the substance of praying itself. Five different requests follow the address of the Disciples’ Prayer. That shows us that the substance of praying is asking. Charles Spurgeon once said, “Whether we like it or not, asking is the rule of the kingdom.” These five requests demonstrate that he was right. The first request, the last line of verse 9, and the second request, verse 10, concern God’s position in the human realm. Let’s take a look at them.

The first thing that we ask is that God's name be hallowed. In the Bible, names are never just names. They are synonymous with the person's personality. They actually partake of the reality that they refer to. So, to ask that God's name be hallowed is to ask that God Himself be hallowed.

The Greek word translated "hallowed" is translated "sanctified" in other verses. It means to locate something in a separate and very special kind of reality.

A good analogy is the practice of retiring numbers of athletes. The Yankees, for example, have retired Mickey Mantle's number "7." The Yankees consider Mantle extraordinary and hold him in higher regard than they do ordinary or even good players. Consequently, they desire to locate him in a reality that is separate from those players. They do that by retiring his number and hanging it in a visible place. Because the number is synonymous with Mantle, locating it in a separate reality is locating him in a separate reality.

That is the way it is with God. God's name is synonymous with God just as the number is with the athlete. To hallow God's name means to locate Him in a separate and special kind of reality. It means to hold Him in higher regard and to treasure and love Him more than we do any other. That is what we are asking here. That God's name, that He Himself, will be treasured and loved in the human realm.

If you and I truly love and care for our heavenly Father, we will just naturally do this. Willard explains this so well. He writes: "IT IS THE PRAYER OF AN ADORING CHILD, SOMEWHAT JEALOUS FOR ITS PARENT."

Let's stop and think about small children for a minute. Their parents are the very foundation of their existence. In a real sense, their parents are their world. So, they jealously adore their parents and actually believe that they are the greatest and best. That doesn't last long and certainly isn't true of teenagers, but it is true of small children. It is absolutely essential to their well being in fact in the early stages of life.

That explains why children are so wounded when someone dishonors or attacks their parents. Why do you think we used to say things like "your mother wears combat boots" or "your mother is so ugly that . . .?" We knew how much it hurt.

It's the same way with God. He's my Father and believe me He is the greatest and best. He is the only utterly competent, remarkable, and lovely being in the universe. I love and adore Him with all of my heart, soul, strength, and mind. Which is why it hurts so much when others don't.

That is certainly the case isn't it? There are a lot of people who think my Father isn't the greatest and best. You can hear it in their conversations, in the way that they use His names. One of the things that they're always saying is "Oh, my God," "Oh, my God," "Oh, my God." That is probably the most commonly repeated phrases in situation comedies and one of the most among young people. The problem is that these people aren't praying to God. The old child's prayer says "God is great, God is good" but it's obvious these people don't think that or they wouldn't be using His name the way they do.

And it hurts when they use it that way doesn't it. Every time I hear someone say "Oh, my God" or "Jesus Christ", it's like them saying "your mother wears combat boots."

Which explains why this is the first request in the Disciples' Prayer. Because we love God and think that He is the greatest and the best, the thing that we want the most is for others to treasure and love Him.

So that is exactly what we pray. I know I do. In fact, this request and the next are really the ones that I am most fervent about. I constantly ask that God will be treasured and loved in the human realm. That the world in general and certain individuals in particular will hold Him in high regard. I know several atheists, agnostics, and backslidden Christians, for instance. So, I pray and ask God that they will hold Him in high regard.

That completes the first verse in the Disciples' Prayer, verse 9. There are three principles in it. #1 – actually address God when you pray. #2 – warm up to pray. And #3 – ask that God and His name will be treasured and loved in the human realm.

YOUR KINGDOM COME . . .

Verse 10 contains the second of the five requests that follow the address part of the prayer. The second request is: "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Look at the words "Your kingdom." I've explained in detail before what the kingdom of God is. It is the range of His effective will. It is the domain or realm where what He wants done is done. The next clause in the verse shows this to be so. "They will be done" simply defines what "thy kingdom come" means.

Notice where we pray for His kingdom to come – "on earth." His kingdom is already come in heaven. Heaven means the unseen spiritual realms that the angels and He inhabit. "On earth" means, in contrast, the place where you and I spend our lives. That includes our homes, offices, workplaces, streets, playgrounds, amusement parks, movie theatres, ball fields, vacation spots, courtrooms, and more. "On earth" means all the places that you and I live our lives.

But how does God's kingdom come there? How is His will done in these places? The answer is "by the things that you and I do and say there."

Take driving, for instance. When you and I are driving, "on earth" means the streets and highways on which we are driving. How God's kingdom comes to those highways and streets is by the things that we say and do there. If we drive courteously, patiently, and lovingly, then God's kingdom has come to earth.

Or take working. When you and I are working, "on earth" is our workplace. How God's kingdom comes to that place is by the things that we say and do there. If we come to work regularly and on time, give our best effort, and bring kingdom goodness to our co-workers and bosses, God's kingdom has come to earth.

That explains what we do in this request. We know our weaknesses, limitations, and habits. We also know how tiny our power of conscious choice is. So, we ask God to assist us in acting within the flow of His will. We ask Him for the knowledge, insight and power we need to bring His kingdom to the places where we spend our lives.

I am praying this request all the time for instance with regard to my home, primarily with my wife since my children are gone. I specifically ask God to give me the patience, insight, and love I need. I ask Him to assist me in bringing His kingdom there.

What are the places where you spend your lives? Whatever they are, you need to pray about them constantly. Pray and ask God to assist you in bringing His kingdom there.

GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD

The third request is found in verse 11. We ask God to give us our daily bread.

This request is so relevant to so many Christians in the world today isn't it? Christians in Honduras, Sudan, Ethiopia, and many other countries wake up in the morning and literally don't know what they will have to eat that day. They must ask for and believe that God will give them bread that day.

I can make what is just an astounding claim in that regard. There has never been one day in my life that I worried about having enough food – and probably neither have any of you. I often tell my wife Jill that it is literally an incredible thing, an aberration in history, that I can have almost anything that I want to eat. Suppose that I want grapes for instance. Even though it's December, I can have them if I want them – right after our service tonight. They are available to me and I have the

resources to buy them. It's the same way with pork chops, watermelon, ice cream, corn on the cob, and so on. I can have anything of those things if I want them. So I'm not really worried about having daily bread. And neither are you.

But this request is still relevant to us because bread here is really symbolic. It stands for all the things that we need to live in a functional manner. Some of those things are common to us all like food, shelter and clothing. Others are peculiar to our own situations. If you are a single mother for instance, one of the things that you need is reliable babysitting for your children. If you don't live in a city with reliable public transportation, one of the things you need is a reliable car. If you're sick, one of the things you need is medication. I think you get the idea. Bread here is symbolic. It stands for all the things that we need to live in a functional manner.

Well, notice what we do in this request. We actually and specifically ask God to provide us with these things. What are the things that you need to live in a functional manner but don't have? Whatever they are, ask God to give them to you.

That does raise what is a crucial issue for Americans. What do we need to live in a functional manner? I am going to list some things and I want you to tell me which are appropriate and inappropriate to ask God for:

A swimming pool, tuition money for college, a 2nd car, a house instead of an apartment, 32" television, stereo player for your bedroom, high blood pressure medication, running shoes, a job, braces for your child's teeth, a new suit, cheap air plane ticket to visit your son or daughter, tires for your car.

The point is a simple one. We must make sure that what we ask for is about functionality and not glamour, luxury or prestige. Those are not kingdom values. Despite what the television preachers say, when we acquire and keep things that involve luxury, glamour, and prestige, it isn't God who gave them. He doesn't have a hand in giving those kinds of things.

Before leaving the third request, I need to comment on two words in it, "this day." We ask God *this day* to give us our daily bread.

Those words emphasize God's provision today for what we need today. We aren't asking God to give us what we need for tomorrow but for today. Today I have God and He has the

provisions for my needs. It will be the same tomorrow and the day after that and the day after that and so on. So I focus on requesting what I need for today.

Does that mean that we can't have provisions for tomorrow or even pray about them? No, it doesn't mean that. It just means that we shouldn't be trusting in them for our future security. Ding that either inhibits or even shuts down kingdom living. So we should trust God and God alone for our future security. It has become almost a platitude for most of us but it really is the call of God – trust Me.

I have to say that this is extremely difficult for American Christians to do. We have so many material resources that it is only natural for us to rely on them instead of God for our future. That's why I said that trusting God is a platitude today. It's because American Christians don't really believe that they can. Their very idea of it is almost ludicrous to them if they'd admit it.

Take financial planning, for instance, for our retirement. Let's face it, most of us aren't relying on God for our old age. We're relying on Social Security and our retirement plans. I'm not saying there is anything wrong with having a retirement plan, as long as it isn't to support over-consumption. But there is something wrong with relying on it for our security. We are on shaky ground if we do because Wall Street and financial markets are fragile and unreliable foundations to build on. God's way is for you and I to ask for our daily needs and trust that He will meet them. That is our security and peace.

I would like to make one more observation before leaving this third request. It isn't just the big things that we ask God for but the little ones as well. Listen to Richard Foster's comment in that regard. Concerning this request in verse 11, he writes: "THIS PRAYER IS COMPLETELY CONSISTENT WITH JESUS' PATTERN OF LIVING, FOR HE OCCUPIES HIMSELF WITH THE TRIVIALITIES OF MANKIND."

Foster is right. The truth is that we can ask God about any need we have no matter how trivial it may be. Charles Spurgeon once said, "Please tell me how big a thing must be before you can pray about it." He then went on to say that it can be something as trivial as lost keys.

This takes us back to the address part of the prayer in verse 9 and the abba heart, the daddy heart, of God. Even with all the

big deals going on in the world around us, like the Iraqi war, famine in Africa, the spread of AIDS, and the pornography problem, God still cares deeply about the wants and needs in our lives right now: the fear of an upcoming surgery, the anxiety of a final exam, the desperation of caring for aging parents, the frustration of dealing with an overbearing boss, the annoyance of bad neighbors; the need for a babysitter and so on.

All those things and a multitude of others are matters of great magnitude to God. Why? It's because they are matters of great magnitude to us, His children.

So let's pray and ask for our daily bread!

FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS . . .

Verse 12 contains the fourth request in the Disciples' Prayer. This request is about forgiving debts or as one translation says it "trespasses."

The first thing that we have to interpret is the word "debts." That word refers to people's failures, mistakes, and sins. I had a pastor friend in Akron named Bernie. Bernie was driving back to the church from an appointment one day at around 2:00 when it struck him. He had a funeral at 1:00, which of course he missed. That is a trespass or debt.

Bernie's lapse demonstrates something about ourselves, which Willard articulates well. All of us are pitiable creatures. Even if we are spiritually advanced and rarely sin, failures and mistakes are going to be our constant traveling companions through life. We may not like to admit it but we really are pitiable creatures with plenty of debts.

The second thing that we have to interpret is the word "forgive." I discussed this in detail in our Sunday School class last quarter. It means that we don't make people pay for wronging, hurting, or inconveniencing us. We desire and do good things for them.

But Willard defines forgiving in a vivid way that goes to the very heart of what it is. He defines it to mean "having pity on people." It is having pity on people who have sinned, failed, or made a mistake.

Most people have an aversion to the word "pity." To most people, to pity someone is to feel sorry for them, which is degrading they think.

So they use more dignified and respectable words that save their ego's like "compassion" and "mercy." In our culture, those words usually connote something like "giving us a break." It's the idea that I'm not really all that bad and neither is what I've done. All I need from you and others is a break.

But in reality, pity connoted a whole lot more than that. It is either God or people not being hardhearted toward us. It's God or people deciding that they won't deal with us on the basis of what we've done, deciding that they won't make us suffer for it. They forgive us instead. They have pity on us and desire and do good things for us.

This teaching contains one of the most life changing principles that I have ever learned. Learning it in fact as revolutionized the way that I regard and treat others. That principle is this. Pity is the very atmosphere in which all of us live. We live with God and people on the basis of their pity for us. Our life isn't possible without it. The hard fact is that we couldn't live or at least couldn't live very well if God and people weren't constantly having pity on us.

I of all people know that. I've been married for 30 years. I think of all the inconvenience and hurt my failures, mistakes, and sins have caused Jill over the years and I realize something. The only reason my marriage has lasted 30 years is because she's had pity on me – and I on her. But it isn't just Jill; it's all of you as well. I've been your pastor now for 16 years and the only reason I've been able to last that long is because you've had pity on me.

Now, the pity that we see in this fourth request moves in two directions.

The first direction is found in the opening line of verse 12, "And forgive us our debts." You can see here that we actually ask God to have pity on us for our sins – and He does. He does not deal with us on the basis of what we've done. He does not reward us according to our wrong doings. It is as if we had never even committed the sins that we committed. So whenever we sin, we

need to immediately repent and ask God to have pity on us. He is quick to have pity on those who request it.

Stop and think of the last time that you sinned. I don't know when that was – a month ago, a week ago, an hour ago. Whenever it was and whatever it was, I hope that the very first thing that you did was pray and ask God to forgive you. If you asked Him, He did and it's as if you hadn't even done it.

The second direction that pity moves is found in the second line of verse 12, "as we also have forgiven our debtors." The first direction is from God to us. The second direction is from us to others. In that second line of the request, "as we also have forgiven our debtors," we are doing two things, both of which are absolutely critical to forgiving others.

First, we are resolving to have pity, as I defined it earlier, on others. We are deciding or intending that we are going to have pity on the people who wronged or inconvenienced us.

Second, we are asking God to help us in doing that. There's a reason that we ask this. Even though it is up to us to forgive, we cannot do it without help. But we can expect help when we ask for it and so that is exactly what we do. We pray constantly and ask God to help us to have pity on others. This request should be a consistent part of our prayer lives.

The fourth request then reveals the first thing that we should do when someone fails or wrongs us. We should pray and do two things. First, promise God that we will have pity on the person. And second, ask God to help us have pity on the person.

That is the approach I've taken with my father-in-law's pastor. My father-in-law and mother-in-law were active lifetime members of their church in Akron, which is smaller than ours, averaging about 185 on Sunday mornings. My mother-in-law became ill and died within a period of four days after going to the hospital. He never once visited her in the hospital. After she died, he never once visited or even called my father-in-law. Then after my father-in-law was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer last year, he never once visited or even called him.

Everyone in the family was upset about it of course but that is exactly the kind of situation in which we apply the Disciples'

Prayer. We should do two things. First, promise God that we will have pity on him. And second, we should ask God to help us have pity on him.

DO NOT LEAD US INTO TEMPTATION . . .

We now come to the fifth and final request in verse 13. There are two parts to this request. The first part is our request that God "lead us not into temptation." The second part defines the temptation that we are talking about, "deliver us from evil." Willard paraphrases that second part, "spare us from the bad things that might happen to us." The temptation we're praying about here is the bad things that happen to us.

The point is a clear one. Bad things happening to us are temptations. They are dangerous challenges to our spiritual lives. They can undermine or actually even destroy our very faith in and love for the living God. Just observe how quickly people attack God when bad things happen to them and you'll see what I mean.

How many of you have ever attacked God either verbally or in your thought life. I have on several occasions during my life. Many years ago, when my sons were little boys, one of them was having an ongoing physical problem. I came home from the hospital one night and actually verbally cursed God. Fortunately, I quickly repented but doing that made me realize the temptation that bad things happening to us really is. So, we pray. We pray and actually ask God to keep bad things from happening to us. This request expresses our lack of confidence in our own spiritual and psychological abilities. It acknowledges that we know just how feeble we really are and that we can't stand up under very much pressure. Because we know that, we pray and ask God to protect us from the bad things that could happen to our loved ones and us. I don't know about you but I pray and ask this almost every morning, "LORD, DON'T LET BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO MY FAMILY, MY CHURCH FAMILY OR ME TODAY."

Let me ask you a question. You might need to give it some thought. What is the bad thing happening to you that would test your faith the most? For most parents, that would be their child being permanently injured or ill. So, they should pray, probably daily, and ask God to spare them from that.

Anyway that is what we do in this fifth request. We ask God to protect and spare us and He usually does. God isn't a sadist who is out to hurt us. Suffering isn't God's preferred way of dealing with us. He loves us deeply and affectionately as children and prefers to not inflict suffering and pain on us. He prefers to keep it from us and usually will if we ask Him.

A few years ago, a popular Jewish rabbi wrote a popular book entitled When Bad Things Happen to Good People. But we need to consider something that most people don't. What about when bad things don't happen to good people.

Just stop and think about how dangerous this world is. I read just last week for instance that brushing our teeth is a dangerous thing to do. Toothbrushes are full of germs and when we nick our gums with them, those germs get into our blood streams and can cause serious illnesses. Then there is the hepatitis virus that people have contracted from eating at Chi Chi's Restaurant.

And those are just "among other things." We hurtle 55 mph or more in steel vehicles down concrete roads with other steel vehicles coming at us at the same speed. We ingest things that are literally filled with bacteria, viruses, and bugs. Angry, dysfunctional, and evil people surround us. Our bodies are so fragile that if our eyes quit tearing we'd go blind and on it goes.

Thinking about it in those terms, it's a miracle that more bad things don't happen to us than do. I said miracle and I mean it. The only reason that a lot of really bad things are happening to us daily is because God doesn't let them happen. God is willing and able to spare us from the trials of life.

So we ask Him everyday to do just that. Don't let your lives be governed by luck, chance, accident or the whim of others. Ask for God's protection and He will usually give it.

On those rare occasions when He doesn't and bad things happen to us, He still grants our request. We still have His unbroken care. We still have the provision we need to emerge victorious. By the time the bad things end, our faith in and love for Him are still in tact. I will always remember what someone from our church told me one day: "MORE BAD THINGS HAVE HAPPENED TO ME THIS YEAR THAN IN THE FIRST 50 YEARS OF MY LIFE

COMBINED. YET I HAVE MORE FAITH IN AND LOVE FOR GOD NOW THAT I EVER HAVE."

However it plays out, ask God to deliver you from evil and He will.

FOR THINE IS THE KINGDOM . . .

The body of the Disciples' Prayer is now over and what it needs is a ringing affirmation of God's goodness and power to end it. That's exactly what the last line in the prayer is. Willard's paraphrase of this is better than any I have ever read: "BECAUSE YOU ARE THE ONE IN CHARGE, AND YOU HAVE ALL THE POWER, AND THE GLORY TOO IS ALL YOURS – FOREVER – WHICH IS JUST THE WAY I WANT IT."

I like the way that he paraphrases the word "amen" to mean "which is just the way I want it." But I like another paraphrase that he suggests even more, "WHOOPEE!" That really is a fit way for us to end this incredible prayer, "WHOOPEE!" Believe me, God won't mind.

EDITORIAL COMMENT (Verses 14-15)

Let me remind you what Jesus is doing in verses 1-18. He is illustrating playing to an audience of One when it comes to three things. The 1st is giving to the poor and the 2nd is prayer. Before He leaves the 2nd thing, prayer, and moves on to the 3rd, fasting, Jesus gives us an editorial comment on the fourth request. It's a principle that all of you know I'm sure. It's quite simple really. If we forgive those who wrong us, God will forgive us for sinning against Him. If we do not forgive those who wrong us, God will not forgive us for sinning against Him.

Suppose that I don't have pity on my father-in-law's pastor but hold a grudge against him, resent him. Also suppose that I then sin and realizing what I've done, repent and ask God to forgive me for it. According to these two verses, what is the outcome of that request? God will not grant it. He will not forgive me for sinning but will hold it against me.

These absolutely critical verses are so to the point that I'm not going to say anything else about them because I don't need to.

FASTING (verses 16-18)

We now come to the third illustration of playing to an audience of One not many. Verses 16-18 are about fasting. Fasting means abstaining from food as a spiritual discipline.

Fasting is a spiritual activity that Christians seem especially to take pride in. Christians seem to think that there is some special virtue in fasting that makes it the noblest of all spiritual exercises. It is probably because we crave and desire food so much that fasting seems like such an advanced exercise to us.

Verse 16 is about playing to an audience of One not many when we fast. This verse pictures those who fast and then do everything they can to let others know they have. I knew several people that fasted on a regular basis. The reason I knew that is because several Christians on several different occasions told me that they did. They knew that they did because the people who fasted told them.

The principle is the same with fasting as it is with everything else. If we play to an audience of many, we are thrust into the human kingdom alone. We get the respect and praise of people but that is all that we get.

Verses 17 and 18 call us to play to an audience of One when we fast. We do it unto God and unto God alone. We do it as a spiritual discipline alone. Whether others know or what they think if they do is of absolutely no concern to us.

SPECIAL APPLICATION OF VERSES 1-18

Playing to an audience of One not many is a problem that plagues almost every local congregation.

What would happen if we did a thoughtful comparison of two things? The first is how much time we spend in churches thinking about what others think. The second is how much time we spend in church thinking about what God thinks. If we compared the two and were honest about it, most of us spend far more time thinking about what others think than about what God thinks. We are playing to an audience of many, in other words, in church. There are at least two ways that we do this.

The first is not being honest and open. When I say honest and open, I mean about things like any serious questions or doubts we have, any disagreements we have, or the way we want to do

things. A few Christians here and there are honest about these things and often obnoxiously so but almost all of us are not. We fear being honest and open about them when we are with other Christians. We are afraid that being that will lead to conflict or will make people think less of us. So we simply refuse to be honest and open. We don't say what we think we need to say or don't do what we think we need to do.

Examples abound. A Christian once told me that she had serious doubts about God's willingness to answer prayer but that she could never share that with other Christians. She said they might think that she wasn't very spiritual. Several Christians have told me that they would like to kneel in the aisle during our worship time on Sunday mornings. They don't though because they're afraid others will think they're off the wall.

You can see in these examples that the Christians are playing to an audience of many. They are more concerned about what other Christians think than about what God thinks.

Clyde Reid identifies this problem and discusses it in his book Evading God. He says that church activities are structured in a way to evade God. He articulates what he calls a "law of religious evasion." That law goes like this: "WE STRUCTURE OUR CHURCHES AND MAINTAIN THEM SO AS TO SHIELD US FROM GOD AND TO PROTECT US FROM GENUINE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE."

Reid goes on to make several observations that support this law including the following: "THE ADULT MEMBERS OF CHURCHES TODAY RARELY RAISE SERIOUS RELIGIOUS QUESTIONS FOR FEAR OF REVEALING THEIR DOUBTS OR BEING THOUGHT OF AS STRANGE. THERE IS AN IMPLICIT CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE ON RELIGIOUS MATTERS IN THE CHURCH."

I have a question for you. When was the last time you didn't say something that you should have in Sunday school or church because you were afraid of what people might think? Or when was the last time you did say or do something that you shouldn't have in Sunday school or church because you were afraid of what people might think.

To foster genuine community and spiritual experience, we need to play to an audience of one and be a lot more honest and open in church than we are.

There is a second way that we can play to an audience of many in church. The first way is to not be honest and open. The second way is to try to "move" people in church.

It really is true that we judge the things that the church does and that go on in it, including worship services, in terms of their effect on people. If people are moved, we deem what was done or experienced successful. If people are not moved, then we deem what was done or experienced unsuccessful.

Pastors especially fall into this trap. If people thought well of the worship service or sermon, then we believe that we have succeeded. But if they thought ill of them, then we believe that we have failed.

This is one of the reasons some pastors and churches are so devoted to highly charged altar services. Successful altar services show that people have been moved and that is what really counts they think. That is sometimes the motivation behind singing invitation songs over and over again.

But there is something that I've learned over the years as a pastor. Just because people thought well of the service or sermon and come back next week with their friends doesn't mean that I have succeeded. I may well have failed in fact.

The measure of success is governed by a principle that we have learned and I hope internalized in Matthew 6. What principle is that? Can anyone tell me? The principle is that we should play to an audience of One not many. The reality is that what people think about the service or sermon doesn't really matter. It is what God thinks about the service or sermon that really matters.

And as we know, what people think and what God thinks may be two entirely different things. Jesus is teaching in Matthew 6:1-18 that it's God's view of the services and activities of the church that counts, not people's. I suspect in that regard that a lot of the trendy activities and ministries that we see in American evangelical churches today don't really please God. They certainly please the people, which is why they are so trendy and popular but they don't please God. This is something that we constantly need to evaluate.

An example of this is the sermon tapes that people special order. I always check the list on Monday morning to see if any people have ordered the sermon I preached the previous day. I do this to get a feel for what does move people. I have come to the point that I can almost precisely predict which sermons will get special orders and which will not. It is my view at least that the ones that please God the most are rarely special ordered.

My point is that sometimes what moves God also moves people and sometimes it does not. Whichever it is, all that matters is whether God is moved.

The final word is that we must live and move within the opinion of God and not people in all the activities and contexts of life. We must play to an audience of One not many. That is the message of Matthew 6:1-18.

Treasuring God Not Wealth **6:19-24**

Jesus has now finished discussing the first thing that can keep us out of the flow of God's presence and power – wrongly desiring the praise and reward of others. He then goes on to discuss the second thing that can in 6:19-34 - wrongly desiring wealth. This whole passage is about bondage to wealth and escaping it. There are two parts to it. The first is verses 19-24, which is about *treasuring* God and not wealth. The second part is verses 25-34, which is about *trusting* God and not wealth.

STORING UP TREASURES

Let's start the first part of this passage with the two actions that Jesus mentions in verses 19 and 20. In verse 19, He mentions storing up for ourselves treasures on earth. In verse 20, He mentions storing up for ourselves treasures in heaven.

To understand these actions, we must first of all accurately determine what "on earth" and what "in heaven" mean. "On earth" clearly means in the realm of material substance, the material world that Satan governs. "In heaven" clearly means in the realm of spiritual substance, the spiritual world that God governs.

Now, Jesus says here that we should not store up for ourselves treasures on earth. What does it mean to store up for ourselves treasures on earth? It means to direct our actions and resources

in ways that are useful or beneficial only in the material realm. It means doing things that do not please God, honor Him, or assist Him in the work He is doing.

In contrast, Jesus says that we should store up for ourselves treasures in heaven. What does it mean to store up for ourselves treasures in heaven? It means to direct our actions and resources in ways that are useful or beneficial in the spiritual realm. It means doing things that please God, honor Him, or assist Him in the work He is doing.

Let me give you examples of people directing their actions and resources a certain way. Tell me if they are building treasures on earth or in heaven.

Example #1. A person becomes an attorney to get rich and make a name for himself. Does this please God, honor Him, or assist Him in the work He is doing. No, it does not. It displeases and dishonors Him in fact. So it is building treasure on earth.

Example #2: A person goes to work at Taco Bell and does his work there like Jesus would do it if He were Him. Does this please God, honor Him, or assist Him. Yes, it pleases and honors Him. So it is building treasure in heaven.

Example #3: A couple buys a simple home as a starter, intending to leave it when they can afford a bigger one. Does this please God, honor Him, or assist Him in the work He is doing? No, it does not. So it is building treasure on earth.

Example #4: A couple buys a simple home because they want to have money to give to others. Does this please God, honor Him, or assist him in the work He is doing. Yes, it does all three. So, it is building treasure in heaven.

Example #5: A person, an attorney I know, runs 17 miles a day so that he can look good and compete in marathons. Does this please God, honor Him, or assist Him in the work He is doing? No, it takes up time from his family in fact, which displeases God. So it is building treasure on earth.

Example #6: A person runs 3 miles a day to stay healthy and well. Does this please God, honor Him, or assist Him in what He is doing? Yes, it does. God cares about our health and doing what is good for our body pleases Him. It is building treasure in heaven.

Those examples clarify what kingdom people do. They store up treasures in heaven. They direct their actions and resources in ways that are useful or beneficial in the spiritual realm, in ways that please, honor or assist God.

A SMART STRATEGY

That is not only the kingdom thing to do; it's the smart thing to do as well. It is smart to store up treasures in heaven. It isn't smart to store up treasures on earth. Jesus explains why in verses 19 and 20.

In verse 19, He observes that it isn't smart to store up treasures on earth because moth and rust destroy and thieves break in to steal. We cannot keep earthly treasures, in other words. Sooner or later, in one way or the other, we will be deprived of them. In fact, that is the very tension that earthly treasures create. It is the tension that someone or something will take them from us.

Take narcissism for example which means treasuring looks. Why is treasuring looks not a smart strategy? Consider some of the world's best looking people, for example, like Elizabeth Taylor, Mary Tyler Moore, Robert Redford, and Harrison Ford. Have you seen them lately? Are they attractive anymore? No, they are not. They are actually unattractive in fact because age has deprived them of this earthly treasure. Those who live for looks, a common modern phenomenon, are on shaky ground indeed.

Then take Edward DeBartolo, who was one of the richest men in America. Does He own anything? Is there any real estate or bank accounts or stocks that stand in his name? No, there are not. As the old adage expresses it, "you can't take it with you." He owns less now than the poorest person in the world.

This observation of Jesus in verse 19 is a devastating fact of life for those whose treasures are on earth. Leo Tolstoy is a classic example of this. Tolstoy was a great 19th century Russian novelist and social reformer. He wrote the classic novel War and Peace. Even after he became one of the most successful writers in human history, he fell into lengthy and suffocating depression. In his book Confessions, he revealed what made him depressed. For the first 48 years of his life, Tolstoy, like almost all Russian intellectuals, believed that there is no God, that the material world is all there is. Thus, the only treasures he had were earthly. But he realized something about those things – what

Jesus says in verse 19. He had a vision in that regard that everything that he valued the most would eventually either die or pass away. And that, he said, is what made him depressed.

In contrast, it is a smart thing to store up treasures in heaven because, as verse 20 teaches, moth and rust cannot destroy and thieves cannot break in to steal. We can keep heavenly treasures in other words. We will not be deprived of them.

The meaning of this is that directing our actions and resources in ways that are beneficial or useful in the spiritual realm has eternal implications. It is inexplicably linked to the eternal life that we live after our bodily deaths. Directing our actions and resources that way actually enhances this life that we live forever. In that sense, we really can take what we do for God and His kingdom with us. I do discuss this matter in detail in a written study I did titled *Life After Life*. If you would like a copy, let me know and I'll see that you get one.

Imagine an egocentric United States president who carries out his duties for his own advancement and a person who makes tacos at Taco Bell like Jesus would make them. The president will eventually lose the treasure he builds but the taco maker will keep his forever.

The moral of the story is that it is smart to store up treasures in heaven but foolish to store them up on earth.

WHAT WE TREASURE DIRECTS OUR LIFE

But storing up treasures in heaven doesn't just affect our life after death. It just as dramatically affects our live on earth before death. That is the essential message of verses 21-23.

In verse 21, Jesus mentions the heart and compares it to the eye in verses 22-23. What the eye is to the body, the heart is to our entire personality.

The eye is what enables the body to function well in its physical environment. Back in 1982, I suddenly developed a problem in my right eye. I didn't go to the doctor and so don't know what caused it but whatever it was, my right eye was totally blurred for about eight hours. It was a very discomfoting thing because I had difficulty moving around and acting in my environment. I was so glad when I woke up the next morning and my eye was

clear again. I learned from that experience that the eye directs the body. It gives orientation to it and enables it to function well.

Jesus says the heart is just like that. When He says "heart" here, He is referring to our spirit or will. He says about it that it is to our personality what the eye is to the body. Just as the eye directs our body, so the heart directs our entire personality. It is the center of our being from which our life flows. It gives orientation to everything that we think, feel, and do. Thus, if the heart is rightly directed, our personality functions well. If the heart is wrongly directed, our personality functions not well.

Now notice what it is that directs our heart in verse 21. It's our treasure. Our treasure focuses or directs our heart. Our treasure determines what we will.

We have then is a critical human process. What we treasure determines the condition of our heart which in turn determines the condition of our entire personality. Most simply put, our treasures dramatically impact what we think, feel, and do.

Drug addicts are an extreme example of this. There was a criminal case in Summit County in which a father used his 12-year old daughter as a prostitute to support his drug habit. That father's treasure was the feeling that the drugs gave Him. That treasure misdirected his will, which in turn misdirected his entire personality. It made him see everything including his daughter's value in relation to it. It was more important than she was. A less extreme but nonetheless serious example is running. Running was for many years a real treasure in my life. That treasure misdirected my will, which in turn misdirected my entire personality. It caused me to do things that I should not have done. I skipped chapel services in seminary to run, ran everyday on my honeymoon, ruined the first meal that Jill cooked for me as my wife, ran everyday of the year including holidays, and so on. It also caused me to feel things I shouldn't have felt. If I wasn't able to run for some reason beyond my control, I felt restless and irritated. Running as I embraced it was a wrong treasure. That wrong treasure misdirected my heart, which in turn misdirected my entire personality.

Those two illustrations are the negative side of the coin. But there is a positive. The right treasure, God and His kingdom, properly directs our heart, which in turn properly directs our entire personality.

Mother Teresa is our model for this because she treasured Jesus. That treasure directed her heart, which in turn directed her entire personality. Most of you know the basis theme and thrust of her ministry. We minister to Jesus by ministering to the poorest of the poor. It was treasuring Jesus in other words that directed her to the poorest of the poor.

That then is the second reason that we should build treasures in heaven. The first is that it conditions the quality of our entire personality and life after death. The second is that it conditions the quality of our entire personality and life after death.

WE CANNOT SERVE TWO MASTERS

Jesus closes out his discussion of what we treasure with a truly dramatic statement in verse 24. We cannot serve two masters.

The whole context of this verse clearly implies what the masters are. They are our treasures. Think about that. Jesus is saying that our treasures are our masters no matter what they are. They are that in the sense that they draw our time, energy, and money from us. Running, for instance, was my master. It controlled my time and energy.

Notice what Jesus says in that regard. We cannot have two masters. He then explains why: "FOR EITHER HE WILL HATE THE ONE AND LOVE THE OTHER, OR HE WILL BE DEVOTED TO ONE AND DESPISE THE OTHER."

What he's saying is that what two different treasures require of us sometimes conflict. Or sometimes we only have enough time, energy, and money to give to one of them. We must then decide which one is our master, our real treasure.

I knew a young attorney in Akron who began spilling his guts to me one day. He told me how frustrated he was because he wasn't spending enough time with his wife and children. That was because he worked at Akron's largest law firm, which required 55 billable hours a week from its associates. That young man experiencing exactly what Jesus is talking about here in verse 24. He couldn't have those two treasures at the same time – time with his wife and children and a prestigious and well paid position in a large law firm. He had to choose, which he did – the second of those.

Having spoken generally in the first part of the verse, Jesus then speaks specifically about two particular treasures, God and wealth. We cannot serve God and wealth, He says.

That's because what those two treasures require conflict. God requires that wealth be a means to an end. Wealth requires that it be the end itself. God requires using wealth to meet only our needs. Wealth requires using it to meet our wants. Wealth requires accumulating it for ourselves. God requires giving it away to others. You can easily see that we cannot meet those conflicting requirements. We cannot treasure both God and wealth. We must treasure one or the other.

Trusting God Not Wealth **6:25-34**

Discussing what we treasure in verses 19-24 just naturally leads Jesus to a related topic in verses 25-34 – what we trust.

He introduces this topic in verse 25 by mentioning what having treasures on earth creates – anxiety. The Greek word translated “anxiety” is a revealing one. In an ancient Greek papyrus letter, a wife wrote to her absent husband, “I CANNOT SLEEP AT NIGHT OR BY DAY, BECAUSE OF THE WORRY I HAVE ABOUT YOUR WELFARE.” The Greek word translated “worry” in that letter is the same one translated “anxiety” in verses 25. As the context of the letter shows, it means to worry anxiously. That is what Jesus discusses here – worrying anxiously.

Worry is one of the biggest problems in people's lives. A newspaper survey back in the 90's asked a random sampling of people this question, “what is the biggest problem in your life.” Two answers were given more than any other – worry and its relative fear. If you are like most people, worry is one of the biggest problems in your life.

To get us ready for what Jesus says about worry, let's list some of the things that people worry about. You might even make it some of the things that you yourself have worried about. What are some of those things.

THE CAUSE OF WORRY

Now that we've rehearsed some of the things that people worry about, let me ask you a significant question. Why do people

worry? We need to ask and answer that question because knowing the cause of worry can lead us to its cure. So what is the cause of worry?

Jesus reveals it in this passage, specifically in the last words of verse 30, "you of little faith." It may seem condemning and blunt but it's true. Not trusting God is always the primary cause of worry. If I worry about my children and grandchildren and what might happen to them, I am not trusting God. If I am on the verge of bankruptcy and worried how I'll get by, I am not trusting in God. If I am ill and worried about dying, I am not trusting God. I have tried some convoluted reasoning in the past to disconnect the link between worry and not trusting God but I cannot. The two are inseparably linked.

Several of God's best friends have made unforgettable comments about this. Billy Graham said, "WORRY BEGINS WHEN FAITH ENDS." That is a good paraphrase of that last line in verse 30. The great Oswald Chambers said, "ALL WORRY IS CAUSED BY CALCULATING WITHOUT GOD." Calculating without God means leaving Him out of the equation.

What these men are talking about is thinking and living as if what is true about God is not true. Suppose it is not true that God exists. Or that God is not all knowing and wise. Or that He is not all-powerful and in control of everything. Or that He doesn't utterly love us. Faith ends, people are calculating without God, when they think and live as if any one or more of those things is not true. They do not trust Him and that is the cause of worry. I remember worrying when I was in law school about our utilities being turned off. We were several months behind in our gas and electric bill. My not trusting God caused the worry.

THE CURE FOR WORRY

That shows us of course what the cure or solution for worry is. It is trusting God.

You can see that in verses 26, 28 and 30. In verses 28 and 30, Jesus mentions two things – the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. He observes about them that Father God feeds the birds and clothes the lilies with beauty. He then concludes in verse 30, how much more will He do so for us.

What Jesus teaches here is at the very heart of the gospel and of human life. You and I are far more valuable to God than birds

and flowers are. If God takes care of them, He'll certainly take care of us as well.

Jesus teaches us that to make His larger point. The cure or solution for worry is trusting God. It is thinking and living as if God exists, is all knowing and wise, is all-powerful, and utterly loves us. So much so in fact that He makes everything, including the horrific things, work together for our God.

Any person who thinks and lives as if all of those things are true, will not worry because there is nothing to worry about. If all those things are true, then the world is a perfectly safe place for us to be. My utilities might be shut off or they might not be shut off but either way God will work it out for good. So why worry?

The language of Billy Graham and Oswald Chambers is helpful here. Worry ends when faith begins. All peace is caused by calculating with God. Most simply put, trusting God is the sure-fire cure for worry.

Mother Teresa, once again, is our example here. One of the things that most ministries worry about is finances. But she never did. A newspaper reported once asked her, "MOTHER, DO YOU EVER WORRY ABOUT MONEY FOR ANY OF YOUR MINISTRIES?" To which she replied: "MONEY, I DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT. IT ALWAYS COMES. THE LORD SENDS IT. WE DO HIS WORK. HE PROVIDES THE MEANS. IF HE DOES NOT GIVE US THE MEANS, THAT SHOWS THAT HE DOES NOT WANT THE WORK. SO WHY WORRY?" Trusting God truly is the cure for worry.

TRUST PRODUCED

So trust Him! I believe that every Christian should have five chief aims in life. Trusting God is one of them.

But most Christians don't. Let's do some syllogistic reasoning here. All worry is caused by not trusting God. Most Christian worry. Therefore, most Christians do not trust God. Is that a valid observation. I think it is.

The problem is that trust isn't something that we can directly will. We can't just decide to trust God and then go out and immediately trust Him. Trust is produced not willed. It is produced in us by the Holy Spirit as we do certain things. We must do those things therefore to trust. Jesus Himself could stand here and tell all of us a million times to trust Him but would not because we could not. Trust is primarily a process not

an event. It is the process of the Holy Spirit producing it in us over time as we do certain things.

It is common sense then that we must learn what those things are and do them. There are three things in my view that we absolutely must do to come to the point that we trust God: build a detailed vision of who He is, practice His presence, and do the best we can to obey Him. We discussed the first two of those in Part 1 of our trilogy. We will discuss the third of those, obey Him, in Part 3.

I would go back to syllogistic reasoning again. Anyone who does those three things will come to trust God. Most Christians are not coming to trust God. Therefore, most Christians are not doing those three things. I hope and pray that we are not one of those who aren't.

TRUSTING AND TREASURING

But there's another factor involved in not worrying that Jesus teaches us here. That factor is the things that we treasure or value the most.

Look at the opening words of verse 25, "for this reason." This is a connecting clause. It connects verses 25-34 with the verses immediately preceding them, verses 19-24. What were verses 19-24 about? They were about our treasures. So Jesus is saying that worrying is linked with treasuring. Let's examine how.

In the opening line of verse 32, Jesus comments, "FOR THE GENTILES EAGERLY SEEK ALL THESE THINGS." By "Gentiles," He means unbelievers, non-Christians. By "all these things," He means the things He has previously discussed in verses 25-31. By "eagerly," He means wrongly. Verses 25-32 then are about things that people value wrongly.

One of those, in the opening line of verse 25, is life itself. I've dealt with a lot of people in a lot of situations over the years. I believe that the one thing that most people, including Christians, value the most is staying alive on earth. Most people will do almost anything to stay alive even in a broken condition. How many of you would agree with that? That staying alive on earth is the one thing that the vast majority of people value the most. To value staying alive on earth the most is to value it wrongly. Verse 27-30 reveals another thing that people value wrongly. Jesus asks a question in verse 27 and I believe the KJV is the

correct translation, "WHICH OF YOU CAN ADD A SINGLE CUBIT TO HIS STATURE." Verse 27 is about height and is connected thematically to the next three verses. Verses 28-30 are about flowers and how they are arrayed, which refers to their beauty.

Height in verse 27 and beauty in verses 28-30 recall a second thing that people value wrongly – physical appearance. This is truer in American culture today than probably any other. Just examine how much time, energy, money, and conversation are given to it and you'll realize it's true. Beauty is one of the things that Americans value the most. But to value it that way, to give it that large a place in our internal and external lives, is to value it wrongly.

The Gentiles and many of us eagerly seek these things and that, Jesus says, is an essential component of worrying. Whatever we value wrongly, we will in fact worry about.

Going back to staying alive on earth, value that the most and you will worry about it. When my father-in-law was taking chemotherapy treatments a few years ago, we met a woman at the chemotherapy center whose daughter did something that I had never heard of. Because she, the mother, had gotten breast cancer, her daughter, fearing that she would get it and die, had a double mastectomy. If staying alive on earth is the thing you value the most, make no mistake, you will worry about it.

It is just the same way with physical appearance and beauty. I told about a survey of fourth grade girls in one of my sermons. Maybe you remember it. A cross section of fourth grade girls were asked the question, "What is the biggest worry in your life right now?" They gave one answer more than any other, "My weight." Imagine fourth grade girls, most thin, worrying about weight. That's what happens when attractive physical appearance is one of the things that we value the most.

But staying alive on earth and beauty are just a sampling here. Jesus is teaching that valuing things wrongly is always a part of worry. It is one of the essential elements of the worrying process.

VALUING GOD AND HIS KINGDOM

That means that valuing things rightly stops the process.

Jesus makes that perfectly clear in verse 33. This is a truly celebrated verse that many if not most of us know by heart. We must seek God and His kingdom first. That means that the only things that we should value the most are God, what He is doing, and His righteousness supremely, more than anything else in life.

Valuing God and His kingdom most works with trusting Him to eliminate worry from our lives. That's because valuing God and His kingdom the most changes the things that we care about. All the things that we now care about, we trust that God supplies. He either gives or does them. So we don't have to worry and I mean at all about them.

Let's go back to verses 28-30 and physical appearance. Verse 29 mentions Solomon in all of his glory.

To understand this verse, let's find a modern day equivalent. Who and what would we think of when we think of beauty, glamour, and splendor? Most people would think of movie stars at the Oscar and Emmy awards. These stars, many of whom are beautiful people, come in some of the most expensive gowns and tuxedos in the world. People are so caught up in the glory of these stars that they come and surround the entrances of the buildings just to get a glimpse of them.

Catch what verse 29 says. Even the beauty of these glamorous stars can't begin to match the beauty of the flowers. The beauty and glamour of the movie stars can't even begin to compete.

But according to verse 30, God gives those who seek Him first a beauty that simply overwhelms that of the flowers. Is Jesus talking about physical beauty here? Obviously not or all of us would look like the Tom Cruise's and Nicole Kidman's of the world. He is talking about inner beauty, a beauty of the soul. That's what God will give us if we seek Him and His kingdom first.

Well, because He does, we don't have to worry about physical beauty like so many in our culture do. That's because we don't care about it. What we do care about is inner beauty, which, as verse 30 shows, God supplies. We trust Him to do that and so we don't worry.

That's the way it is with so many things. We don't worry about staying alive on earth, verse 22, because we don't care ultimately about staying alive on earth. What we do care about is our

eternal lives, which God supplies. We don't worry about getting the approval of others because we don't care about the approval of others. What we do care about is getting God's approval, which He supplies. We don't worry about keeping up with the Jones's because we don't care about keeping up with the Jones's. What we do care about is living simply, which God supplies, and on it goes.

Jesus closes out this section with a touch of humor in verse 34. All that we have is the present day and there are enough problems in it. So focus on solving those problems and not worrying about problems that aren't even here yet.

SUMMARY OF CHAPTER 6

We are now finished with chapter 6. Let me quickly review it for you. In chapter 5, Jesus shows us how a person who accesses the presence and powers of God's kingdom lives his or her life. It shows us what a kingdom person and life looks like.

In chapter 6, Jesus discusses two things that cut us off from the flow of the kingdom – that prevent us from being kingdom people and living kingdom lives. Those two things are playing to an audience of many and having the wrong treasures.

To be kingdom people living kingdom lives, we must therefore do two things. First, we must to play to an audience of One. And second, we must treasure and trust God and His kingdom more than anything else.

Judging Others 7:1-12

Jesus begins chapter 7 preaching about several other things that can cut us off from the flow of the kingdom. He addresses several underlying attitudes and practices that shut us out of the kingdom life. The first of those in verses 1-5.

JUDGING DEFINED

The first two verses reveal what this section is about – judging others. It's clear from the context here that judging means condemning. So whenever I use the word "judging" with regard to this passage, I mean condemning.

To understand this passage of course, we must understand what judging means. So please define for me what it means for one person to judge another. I would define it this way. Judging means that we communicate to someone that we disapprove of them or of something that they are doing. We communicate to them that there is something wrong with them or what they are doing. "Wrong" means that it is either immoral or unwise.

Give me an example of one person judging another as I've just defined it. I'll start you off with a rather innocuous one. My wife Jill has the habit of leaving the radio and fan on when she turns off the car. A mechanic told me that we shouldn't really do that and so I told Jill. I told her that she shouldn't leave the radio and fan on when she turns the car off. I judged or condemned her in other words.

Let me ask you a question in that regard. Why is judging significant enough for Jesus to mention it here? It's for two reasons I think.

The first is that the practice of judging is so pervasive and deep in human relationships. Almost everyone does it in almost every conceivable context. Have you ever been part of any human context where it wasn't going on? I haven't and probably never will be part of one. Judging is such a large part of normal human existence that most of us can't even imagine what life would be like without it.

There's a second reason that judging is significant enough for Jesus to mention here. It's because it impacts human relationships so dramatically. It often even establishes the tones of those. Suppose, for instance, that each of us couldn't judge our spouses for a month – that we couldn't communicate any disapproval to them during that time. How do you suppose the dynamics of our relationship with them would change? The answer for many of us is "dramatically." Which is exactly why Jesus discusses it here.

THE MINISTRY OF CONDEMNATION

Now that we know what judging is, we need to also know, "should we do it?" The Bible does teach us that there is what Willard calls "a ministry of condemnation." This ministry of condemnation involves three things. First, we discern sins,

failures, and mistakes in people's lives. Second, we discuss those with them. And finally third, we hold them personally responsible for them. This is a valid practice that the Bible endorses.

Paul himself calls us to this ministry in Galatians 6:1. He also gives us five guidelines to follow in exercising it.

The first is found in the words "*caught* in any trespass." The word "caught" implies certainty. Don't condemn someone for being or doing something until you know for sure that they are guilty of it. Always assume that they aren't guilty of it until you know for sure that they are. Don't start condemning at least until you know for sure they are.

The second guideline is that not just anyone is to condemn. Paul states that the only ones who should condemn are those "who are spiritual." Condemning people requires great personal and spiritual maturity. We need to live and work in a divine power not our own if we're going to condemn people successfully. Only a certain kind of character and life, a kingdom character and life, puts us into a position to condemn.

The third guideline is that the only aim of condemnation is to "restore." Our aim isn't to straighten people out, to get them to be and do what we want them to be and do. It also isn't to let them know where we stand. Our aim is to restore them. That means that we're trying to bring them back to the path of morality or wisdom for their own good and/or the good of others.

The fourth guideline is that we must condemn with what Paul calls "a spirit of gentleness." It is always wrong to condemn people with a spirit of anger or contempt. We must do so with a spirit of gentleness instead. The person being condemned should feel compassion and respect not hatred and disdain.

The fifth guideline is that we must condemn humbly. As Paul says it here, we must "look to ourselves." We must know that we too are capable of the same thing we're condemning in someone else, or even worse. This is a critical thing. It removes the self-righteousness, superiority, and pride that energize so much of the condemning we do.

Willard tells about Saint Dominic who is our model for all of this. This pious saint founded the great Dominican Order of Preachers. He lived by the order's strict rules and condemned those who didn't. Listen to just two of the many testimonies about how he

did that. Paul of Venice said: "HE REPRIMANDED OFFENDERS JUSTLY AND SO AFFECTIONATELY THAT NO ONE WAS EVER UPSET BY HIS CORRECTION AND PUNISHMENT." Brother Frugario said: "HE CONVICTED AND CORRECTED OFFENDERS WITH GENTLENESS AND KINDNESS IN SUCH A WAY THAT NO ONE WAS UPSET, EVEN THOUGH THE PENANCES WERE SOMETIMES VERY SEVERE."

What a great man of God Dominic was. He had the ministry of condemnation. We can too if we do what Dominic did. Meet the five guidelines that Paul sets down in Galatians 6:1.

DO NOT JUDGE – IT DOESN'T WORK

So, there is a ministry of condemnation but it's very limited indeed. Jesus makes that perfectly clear in verses 1-5. He commands us, "Do no judge," and then explains why – for two reasons.

First, even if we meet all five of the guidelines I just discussed, judging people rarely works. It rarely influences people in a positive way. You can see that in verses 1 and 2. These verses show us what almost always happens when we judge others. They almost always counterattack in the very same terms. They judge us right back and in the same way that we judged them.

Let me ask you. Why do they do that? It's because condemnation hurts so much.

Let's consider what condemnation does. It knives into the most vulnerable parts of their interior life including their very identity. They see it as a stinging attack, a shocking assault upon them. They interpret it to mean that they are bad in an unredeemable way - that they are unacceptable. This is so even if we have judged them in the kindest and most loving of ways.

I've said before that a kingdom people are open and even thankful when they are criticized and judged. But how many kingdom people are there really and how often do they have to be judged?

Most people are going to do what Jesus says in verse 2. They are going to counterattack in the very same terms. They are going to judge us in the very same way that we judged them.

A mother I know confronted her 20-year old son about smoking. She pointed out how addictive and harmful it was to him. So he got mad and judged her right back in her own terms. He noted how much coffee she drank and how addictive and harmful it was to her.

Then there is popular author and speaker Joyce Landorf. Joyce decided to confront her daughter Laurie about an unhappy and destructive love relationship she had with an unsaved man. Laurie was deeply offended by what Joyce said and lashed out right back. She told Joyce in no uncertain terms that she was an insufferable meddler whose books and speaking engagements had gone to her head. That she really didn't know nearly as much as she and everyone else thought she did. Laurie then stormed out of the house, resulting in a severe alienation between Joyce and her. Joyce's ultimately concluded, "I shouldn't have done it." Jesus, according to verse 2, would have agreed.

Almost no one takes being judged well, no matter how lovingly it's done. Remember that the next time you're going to judge.

DO NOT JUDGE – WE AREN'T QUALIFIED

Jesus says that we usually shouldn't judge for a second reason. The first reason is that even if we meet all five guidelines for the ministry of condemnation, judging usually doesn't work. The second reason is that we rarely meet all five guidelines and so aren't qualified to judge.

That really is the underlying message of verses 3 and 4. Jesus talks about looking at the splinter in someone else's eye when we have a board sticking out of ours. He is being funny here and I'm sure His audience laughed at this. But they also got the point. The point is that almost everyone who judges others has a serious spiritual problem themselves that needs to be removed.

A lot of Christians misunderstand that. They think that the board in the eye is some problem or sin that the judger himself has. I once observed a lawyer who was having an affair condemn another lawyer for lying to his client. The 2nd lawyer shot back that the 1st should get his own house in order before condemning him. Most Christians interpret verses 3 and 4 that way. They think it's the idea that we shouldn't judge the problems and sins of others until we get rid of our own.

But that probably isn't what Jesus is saying here. What He's doing instead is giving us a deep insight about condemnation itself. The board in the eye isn't some other problem or sin that the judge has, like that lawyer's adultery. It's the very fact that he is judging himself. That is the board – the mere judging itself. The mere fact that he's judging others himself shows us that he is a hypocrite.

Here's why. It's because anger and self-righteousness are almost always a part of condemnation. If you watch anger, for instance, you'll see that it almost always ends in condemnation. That's probably because condemning people is such a handy way of hurting them deeply.

But even anger isn't as closely associated with condemnation as self-righteousness is. There is almost always an air of superiority about our condemnation. I wouldn't even think of doing like that let alone do it. How in the world could you?

Because of that, condemnation itself makes us what Jesus calls "hypocrites" in verse 5. Our condemnation almost always involves anger and/or self-righteousness, both of which are usually just as bad, if not worse, than the very thing we are condemning.

This is a profound insight. Anyone who understands and believes it takes a significant step toward being a kingdom person in this context.

When I was practicing law, I filed a motion for a client to change visitation rights. Her ex-husband was smoking pot with friends when the kids were with him for the weekend. So, we wanted to modify the divorce decree to supervised visitation. His attorney downplayed these incidents of course and essentially argued that smoking a little pot wasn't any big deal – certainly not worth denying him visitation rights. I was angry at this attorney's cavalier attitude toward the whole situation and let him know. I judged him. I told him after the hearing that he should probably think about developing a moral code.

I had a board in my eye didn't I when I told him that? Based on how I've interpreted verses 3 and 4, explain what that board was. Explain what my hypocrisy was. It was that I was angry and had an attitude of self-righteousness and pride. I wouldn't even think

of arguing something like that, I thought. According to Jesus, my anger and self-righteousness were as bad, if not worse, than he arguing what he did was.

So, that's why Jesus says what He says, "do not judge." First, even if we meet all five guidelines in Paul's ministry of condemnation, judging rarely works. People don't usually change. They just judge us right back. Second, we rarely meet all five guidelines. The anger and self-righteousness with which we judge are usually as bad, if not worse, than the thing we are judging. That makes us unqualified to judge.

TAKE THE BOARD OUT

That makes our calling, in verse 5, clear. Take the board out of our own eye. That means get rid of the anger and self-righteousness that energizes the judging we do.

If we do that, Jesus says, we'll see clearly to take the speck out of our brother's eye. Anger and self-righteousness blind us to the reality of the person we're judging. We don't see him but only his sin. But once those two things are removed, we see the person and his need and I mean clearly. We see that there is a far better way to influence him for good, which we'll discuss when we get to verses 7-11.

Forcing Good Things on Others

7:6

In verse 6, Jesus reveals another practice with its underlying attitude that can keep us out of the flow of God's kingdom.

This second practice and its attitude is related to the first. Dale Carnegie was famous for his conferences on "How to Win Friends and Influence People." That is what both the first and second practice are about. We are trying to influence people for good. We are trying to get them to be something that is better than what they already are. Or we are trying to get them to do something that is better than what they are doing. The first practice was judging them. The second practice, in verse 6, is forcing good things on them.

THE PEARLS

Verse 6 is one of the most familiar verses in the Bible. It is so familiar that it's become a proverb in fact. We hear people saying it a lot. Don't cast your pearls before swine. The problem is that this verse is just as misunderstood as it is well known. So, let's figure out what it really means.

Jesus talks about doing two things here. The first is giving what is holy to dogs. The second is feeding pearls to pigs. Both of these activities are figures of speech. That means that they both stand for something else. That something else is the same in both figures of speech. Giving what is holy to dogs means the same thing as feeding pearls to pigs. So, I'm just going to talk about feeding pearls to swine.

Let's start with the pearls (or their counterpart "what is holy") and what they stand for. They stand for things that are valuable, helpful, or good. A mother and I were talking about the one thing more than any other that we want for our children. So let me ask you just that. What is the one thing more than any other that you want for your children? Think about that some time. I know what it is for me. The one thing that I want for my sons more than anything else, and my daughter-in-law, is a familiar friendship with Jesus. That is the pearl of all pearls. That is the most valuable, the most helpful, the best of all things.

But pearls don't just stand for things of God. They stand for all the valuable, helpful, and good things that we want the people around us to experience or have.

There are many such things. A mother wants her 12 year-old daughter to read more. A father wants his newly employed son to save \$100 a month. A person wants his friend to exercise and lose some weight. A homeowner wants his neighbor to keep his house in good repair. A person wants his employer to be kinder and more generous to his employees. And on and on it goes.

Do something this week. Make a list of some of the good things that you want some of the different people in your life to experience or have. Those things on your list are the kinds of things that the pearls represent. Would anyone like to share what one of those good things is?

THE PIGS

Now that we know what the pearls stand for let's move on to the pigs to which they are fed. Let's examine what they stand for.

I do want to interject a quick reminder here. Jesus isn't saying that we should view certain classes of people as pigs and dogs. That is a more important point than we may realize. I am told that there was a favorite line on the Drew Carey Show, which was one of the raunchiest on TV. Apparently one character is always calling another character "pig." Along those same lines, I remember my teammates on my college baseball team calling certain girls "dogs."

That kind of attitude has absolutely no place in the kingdom of God. We know better don't we as Christians. We know that all the human beings that we encounter everyday are what C.S. Lewis called "immortals." They are people with an eternal destiny for whom Jesus died. We should treat each one that way, with the dignity and respect they deserve.

So, the pigs don't represent certain classes of people that we hold in contempt. What they do represent is people who won't accept the good things that we have or want for them. That is all too frequently the case isn't it? We care about someone and have or want some good thing for them. But they don't grasp the value of it. Consequently, they don't want or aren't ready for it.

I knew a young man who got a job out of college and was making more than enough money to live on. For several years, his father tried to get him to live sensibly and save money. That money would then be there for emergencies and eventually retirement.

What the father wanted for his son was a good thing that would have made his life better. But his son didn't think he needed that and didn't want it. He wanted an expensive car, a spacious house, and a boat instead and went into long term debt to get them. He wouldn't do what his father wanted and said.

That young man is the kind of people that the pigs in verse 6 stand for. They stand for people who won't accept the good things that we have or what for them. They are people who do not want or are not ready for those good things.

FEEDING PEARLS TO PIGS

Having determined what the pearls and pigs stand for, we can now address the next interpretive issue. Notice what Jesus says

kingdom people won't do. They won't feed pearls to pigs. That is the next interpretive issue. What does feeding pearls to pigs stand for?

To answer that, let's imagine literally feeding pearls to swine. Suppose Jim Deemer goes on vacation and puts you in charge of feeding the pigs on his farm. So the first day, you feed them a bunch of pearls. You come back the second day and see that they haven't eat them but feed them more pearls. And so on for the entire week that Jim is gone. What are you doing? You are trying to force pearls on pigs.

That helps us understand what feeding pearls to pigs stands for. It stands for trying to force good things on people that they don't want or aren't ready for. When I say force I mean coerce them into accepting the good things against their will. We make them accept it or at least try to.

Take compulsory education for instance. Let's analyze this in terms of this figure of speech. What is the pearl? It is education. Learning is one of the greatest privileges a person can have. It will dramatically improve a person's life. What are the pearls? They are students in our schools who don't want educated for one reason or the other. What is feeding the pearls to the pigs? It is requiring by law that young people complete at least 10 grades of education. Compulsory education is a classic example of feeding pearls to pigs.

But we need to get much more personal than that to grasp the essence of verse 6. All of us have tried to feed pearls to pigs.

I know that I have. When my sons were teenagers, I told them that I wanted them to read Celebration of Discipline. One of them didn't want to though. So I told him that he couldn't drive the car again until he did. Let's analyze that in terms of verse 6. What was the pearl? Reading Foster's book, which would have enhanced my sons' lives. What was the pig? It was my son who didn't want to read it. What was feeding pearls to the pigs? It was me not letting that son drive the car again until he did.

What about you? Can you give me any examples of feeding pearls to pigs in your own life, whether you were on the feeding or receiving end?

THE MEANING

Now that we know what feeding pearls to pigs mean, notice what Jesus says in that regard. Don't do that. Don't feed pearls to pigs. Don't force good things on people who don't want or aren't ready for them. That practice is not part of the kingdom life.

But why is it not? What is there about forcing good things on people that make it inconsistent with what kingdom people are and do?

Most Christians answer that question incorrectly. They misconstrue the concern of Jesus here. They think we shouldn't feed pearls to pigs because the pigs aren't worthy of them. They think that we shouldn't waste the good things we have on people who won't appreciate or accept them.

Christians often speak of this in the context of evangelism. I had an unsaved friend in law school who wouldn't have anything to do with the gospel. He told me that he liked me but not Christianity and he'd appreciate it if I didn't mention it around him. A Christian that I told about this responded like a lot of Christians do. He quoted verse 6 and said: "DON'T CAST YOUR PEARLS BEFORE SWINE. YOUR FRIEND ISN'T WORTHY OF THE GOSPEL. SHAKE THE DUST OFF OF YOUR FEET AND FORGET ABOUT SHARING IT WITH HIM."

We speak in the same vein regarding our adult children. Those of us at Bethel with adult children joke about being members of *The SYB Club*, that is "The Save Your Breath Club." Our thrust is that they won't take our advice anyway and so we might as well not waste it on them.

In these two instances and countless others, many Christians think the thrust of verse 6 is the pigs not being worthy of the pearls. Kingdom people don't want pearls wasted on pigs. They don't want good things wasted on people who don't appreciate or want them.

But that isn't the thrust of verse 6. Based on the context of verse 6, the verses preceding and following it, and its closing words, the concern of Jesus is not the pigs aren't worthy of the pearls. It's that the pearls aren't helpful to the pigs.

Let's go back to feeding Jim's pigs while he's on vacation. Will the pigs get all excited because we've given them pearls to eat. Of course they won't. As verse 6 points out, all they'll do is ignore them and thus trample them under their feet as they walk

around. Why? Because all they really care about is eating and they can't eat pearls. But suppose we come everyday and give them bunches of grapes instead of pearls. Will the pigs get all excited because we've given them grapes to eat. Of course they will. They'll enthusiastically go after those grapes and quickly devour them. Why? Because all they care about is eating and they can eat the grapes. Grapes are their favorite in fact.

That opens up the meaning of verse 6 to us. The concern of Jesus isn't that the pigs aren't worthy of the pearls. It's that the pearls aren't helpful to the pigs. Pigs don't have any use for pearls. Jesus isn't concerned about the pearls being wasted. He's concerned about the pigs not being helped.

The application is clear. Kingdom people don't force good things on people that they won't accept. They don't push valuable things on them that they don't want or aren't ready for. It isn't that they aren't worthy of these good or valuable things because they are. It's just that those things, at the time at least, aren't helpful to them.

We see this in compulsory education. You've all heard the astonishing statistics about the number of American students who graduate illiterate. My son Aaron taught in a Philadelphia junior high and almost none of the students, many of whom we're 16, could write a paragraph with correct spelling and punctuation. Most didn't punctuate at all in fact and misspelled most of the words that were longer than four letters. We scratch our heads and ask "why" but it isn't really all that hard to figure out. Education is one of the most beneficial things in life but it just isn't helpful to those who don't want or aren't ready for it. I'm not saying that we should or shouldn't have compulsory education because I don't really know enough about it to make that kind of judgment. I'm just saying that if we do have it, we need to understand the dynamics of this verse. It won't be helpful to those who don't want or aren't ready for it.

That is why kingdom people will usually not force good things on others. Going back to our discussions in chapter 5, kingdom people value others and want what is best for them. Since forcing good things on them is rarely what is best for them, they usually don't do that.

Notice I said "usually." That's because there may be circumstances in which it is the best thing for them. Suppose our 16 year-old child is drinking alcohol and won't stop. Or suppose

our employee is being rude to customers and won't stop. In circumstances like those, the greater good may require forcing good things on others and so that is what kingdom people do.

TEAR YOU TO PIECES

In the last line of verse 6, Jesus explains what usually happens when we force good things on people. He says that they will turn and tear us to pieces. If you have ever worked with animals, you understand what Jesus is saying here. If we feed the pigs nothing but pearls, they'll eventually become famished. And because they're famished, they eventually turn and eat us. The pearls may not be edible but we are.

It's a vivid picture, the lesson of which is clear. Remember what we discussed about judging or condemning others. The same is true of forcing good things on people who don't want or aren't ready for it. It almost never works. They rarely receive these good things and change. They just get angry, defensive, or frustrated and end up attacking us instead.

I read about a young man who became engaged to a woman who was his mother's nightmare. He met her in a bar of all places where she spent a good deal of her time. She had been married before and borne a child out of wedlock.

This son's mother was so concerned about the whole thing that she decided to evangelize her future daughter-in-law. She came on strong and never let up. She confronted her repeatedly with the gospel of Jesus even though she was asked several times not to.

Well, her son's fiancée finally got so fed up that she broke off her relationship with her. The son married her anyway and she eventually got her life straightened around. She didn't become a Christian but settled down and became a decent mother and wife. But she is so resentful of the mother that to this day she has never been invited to her son's house or allowed to get to know her three grandchildren. It's verse 6 all over again, "THEY WILL TURN AND TEAR YOU TO PIECES."

Like judging or condemning, forcing good things on people rarely works. They rarely receive the good things and change. They just get angry, defensive, and frustrated and end up attacking us instead.

So, what is our approach to the people that we desire to help? Should we do nothing? No, because doing nothing is unacceptable. It is inconsistent with love. If we truly love people, we will do something to influence them for good. But that something is not usually judging or forcing. It is what Jesus discusses in verses 7-11.

Asking **7:7-11**

Verses 7-11 are the kingdom approach to influencing people for good. In verses 1-6, Jesus has shown us two prevailing practices that usually don't influence people for good – judging and forcing. In verses 7-11, He now shows us two practices that together work far better than judging and forcing do.

ASKING PEOPLE

Let's start with the word "ask" and its synonyms "seek" and "knock." Those words are used nine times in these five verses. That shows us the kingdom method for dealing with and influencing people for good. That method is asking. We don't usually judge or force but we ask.

What we do in asking is change the dynamics of our personal relationships. You see, when I condemn, nag, or force someone, that person's biggest problem is me. He thinks he has to respond to me and does. He judges me right back, verse 2, or attacks me, verse 6, ignoring his real problem in the process. His problem with me overshadows the problem he needs to address. So, I back off instead. I begin loving and respecting him as a human being in God's image. I begin acting thoughtfully and graciously to him. Once I do that long enough, he realizes that I am his ally not his opponent or adversary.

That is a significant thing that is essential to my human relationships. The people with whom I'm dealing must believe that I am ally not their opponent or adversary. I'll never get very far with them until we do.

Anyway, once a person realizes I am his ally, genuine communication and relationship will eventually develop between us. At that point, the healing dynamic of asking comes naturally into play and so that's exactly what I do. I ask.

This is the kingdom way to which all of us should commit ourselves. That way is an attitude, respect, that has an accompanying action, asking. This is the way of Jesus and those who are like Him.

I know a husband a wife who are both in their mid-50's. For years, the wife nagged her husband, that is continually judged and forced, about three bad habits he had that were affecting his health – smoking, eating too many sweets, and not exercising. She tried every form of judging and condemning possible to get him to change but he didn't. The more she nagged him, the more adamant in his position and habits he became. It was a source of constant tension between them.

She finally got tired of it all and tried a different approach. She began bringing kingdom goodness into her relationship with him. She began loving and respecting him as a human being. Then one day, when they were enjoying each other's presence and she thought the time was right, she simply and sweetly asked him: "HONEY, WOULD YOU DO SOMETHING FOR ME. I'M CONCERNED ABOUT YOUR HEALTH BECAUSE I LOVE YOU SO MUCH. WOULD YOU PLEASE TRY TO . . ." and named the three things I mentioned earlier.

That is what verses 7 and 8 are all about. Think about something beneficial that you want someone to do. Maybe you want your husband to quit watching so much football on Sundays. Or your wife to quit spending so much money on knick-knacks. Or your co-worker to stop gossiping. Or your Christian friend to practice the spiritual disciplines. Or your teammate to work harder. Or your attorney to return your calls. Or your son to save money. Whatever it is, instead of judging and forcing, try asking. Bring kingdom goodness to the person that you are trying to influence. Then ask. According to verses 7 and 8, asking in the context of goodness is the kingdom method for dealing with people.

THE POWER OF THE REQUEST

And it works. Notice what Jesus observes in verses 7 and 8. If we ask, we will receive. If we seek, we will find. If we knock, it will be opened up to us. All three of those statements are saying the same thing. Asking usually works. Remember what we've learned in the preceding verses. Judging and forcing rarely work. People usually don't change. They just judge us right back or attack us. But asking usually works.

Certainly, it doesn't work all the time. Maybe our relationship with the person we're asking is damaged by previous experience. Or maybe the person is dysfunctional or morally depraved. Or maybe the request is a bad one and shouldn't be granted. Under those circumstances, the request probably won't work.

But otherwise, asking works far better than judging and forcing do. If we love and respect people as human beings in the image of God, asking usually gets the desired result.

There is a reason it does. That reason is what Willard calls "the power of the request." He states that the very act of asking people brings a great power to bear upon them. That power makes it very hard for them to say "no." This is a fundamental truth of human existence and it underlies what Jesus says in verses 7 and 8. These verses make clear that asking people brings a great power to bear upon them.

This power is so great that it makes us uncomfortable. Willard briefly mentions what is a great demonstration of this. He talks about eating a sandwich in front of the family dog. All of us who have dogs understand the dynamics that underlie this.

We have a dog named Caleb, who is a delight to have around – most of the time. Like most dogs, whenever we sit down with a snack at night, Caleb sits right down next to us. He sits down next to us and there they are – the face, the eyes, and the paw on the knee. You know how dogs do. They stare at what you are eating then turn and stare at you and then back to what you are eating and so on. What they're doing is asking. And who can resist. I know it's not me. So, Caleb gets what he wants. It's the very same way with human beings. The power of the request is so great that it makes us uncomfortable. We'll actually go considerably out of our way to avoid someone whom we know is going to ask us for something.

I remember avoiding my pastor when I was practicing law for two weeks. I went out the opposite where he was standing and greeting people so I wouldn't have to talk with him. I did that because I knew he was going to ask me to be an elder and I was going to have to say "no." I was teaching Sunday school already and doing my part in other ways but still didn't want to have to tell him "no." I was feeling the power of the request.

I know by my own experience and so do you that asking works. When we ask someone to be or do something, they are up against one of the most fundamental forces of the universe – the power of the request. So, ask. Asking works far better than judging and forcing do. As Jesus says it here in verse 7, “ask and it will be given to you.”

ASKING GOD

In verses 9-11, Jesus shows us a second practice that works with the first to influence people for good. The first practice is that we ask the people. The second is that we ask God. Having considered asking people in verses 7 and 8, Jesus moves to asking God in verses 9-11.

Look first of all at verses 9 and 10. Jesus begins talking about fathers and sons. Having been a father for almost 26 years now, I understand what these verses are about. I can tell you that there isn't any earthly relationship more interactive than the one between fathers and sons. Well, these two verses reveal what a primary part of that interaction is. It is asking – the sons asking for what they need and the fathers giving it.

That is certainly the way it was with my sons and me. Dad, I need the car, may I use it? Yes! Dad, will you help me with my homework? Yes! Dad, may I have lunch money for school? Yes! Dad, will you fix my ball glove? Yes! And on it went – my sons asking for what then needed and me usually giving it, hundreds of times.

But that is only natural isn't it? It doesn't take all that much to figure it out. Explain to me why my sons asked.

The explanation is an easy one. My sons knew that I loved them with all of my heart. Also that I had the ability to give them a lot of what they needed and wanted. So, they just naturally asked.

That, Jesus says in verse 11, is the way it is with God and us. He's our heavenly Father. That means that our relationship with Him is highly and experientially interactive. And one of the primary parts of that interaction is asking. It is you and I asking and Him giving us what we need.

But that is only natural isn't it? After all, we know that He loves us with an indescribably deep love. We also know that He has

the ability to give us literally anything that we want and need. In that kind of relationship, asking is just as natural as breathing is. So, we ask.

We ask for the people that we're trying to influence. That really is what verse 11 is primarily about. Jesus is saying that if we want to influence people for good, we should pray for them. We should ask God on their behalf. But what should we ask? The people that we're praying for and the good that needs to be accomplished will determine that.

A mother I knew was worried that her daughter would start smoking when she went to college. So, she followed God's model in verse 7. First, she asked her to not smoke even the first cigarette. Second, she asked God to make her daughter sick if she did so that she'd never smoke another one.

Whether that was the right prayer to pray or not, she was right in praying. Don't just ask the person that you are trying to influence. Ask God as well. Ask Him to do what needs to be done for the person's good.

THE POWER OF THE REQUEST

Notice what happens when we do that. Verse 11 says that God gives. Just like asking people does, asking God works. When we ask, He gives.

Jesus explains why He does in verses 9 and 10. He pictures a monster really in these verses – an earthly father who is unmoved by his child's request. But he uses the exception to prove the rule. The power of the request is at work in all human relationships but especially with fathers and children. It's far greater, far more intense, there. If you ask me to give or do something, there is great power in your request. But if my sons ask me, the power is even greater. It is very difficult for me to say "no."

It's the same way with God and us, Jesus teaches in verse 11. He's our Father who loves us far more deeply than we love our children. The power of the request we feel when our children ask us, He feels when we ask Him, only greater. There are limits on His giving what we ask, of course, just as there on our giving to our children. But the general rule is that when we ask, He gives.

Most of you know our area superintendent, John Ryser. I've told the story before about John's father Paul asking him to not drink. Paul was a great man of God and wonderful father whom John, even as a teenager, respected and loved. Remember the story that a month before John entered high school, Paul had a talk with him. He told him that he'd be facing temptations in high school that he hadn't faced before, one of the strongest of which would be drinking alcohol.

But that wasn't all that Paul did. As John found out years later, he also prayed. He prayed constantly for his son and asked God to give Him the courage of His convictions. The courage to stand tall in the face of peer pressure when everyone else around him was bowing down to it.

Paul asked and it worked. John faced intense peer pressure on several occasions to drink but didn't. He says the primary reason he didn't was that his father asked him not to.

What Paul did here was an example for us all. He tried to influence his son for good by asking. He asked not only the person he was trying to influence but His heavenly Father as well. He asked and it was given to Him.

SUMMARY

That then is the kingdom way for influencing people. We must love and respect people so much that we want to influence them for good. But we will do this not by judging, verses 1-5, or forcing, verse 6, but by asking. The underlying attitudes and actions of judging and forcing usually cut us off from the flow of the kingdom of heaven. The underlying attitude and action of asking help us access it.

The Golden Rule

7:12

With verse 12, Jesus summarizes everything that He said before in 5:21-7:11 about how kingdom persons live their lives. This verse expresses the defining characteristic of a community of such persons. It's a community in which everyone treats everyone else the way that they want to be treated.

Verse 12 is without doubt one of the most renowned verses in the Bible. Most non-Christians in fact probably know this verse better than they do John 3:16.

I want you to realize just how unique what Jesus says here is. A skeptic once told me that the teachings of Jesus aren't really any different or better than those of the great masters like Aristotle, Plato and Confucius. He then pointed to this verse as an example of what he meant. He said that it isn't anything new, that Jesus was merely repeating what the great masters before Him taught.

I do not deny that this verse has parallels in other teachings but they are just that, parallels. There is a huge difference between what the great masters taught and what Jesus teaches here. See if you can figure out the difference.

A pagan came to the great Jewish rabbi Hillel and said: "I WILL CONVERT TO JUDAISM IF YOU CAN TEACH ME THE WHOLE LAW WHILE I'M STANDING ON ONE LEG." To which Hillel replied: "WHAT IS HATEFUL TO YOURSELF, DO TO NO OTHER; THAT IS THE WHOLE LAW, AND THE REST IS COMMENTARY."

The Chinese emperor Tsze-Kung once asked Confucius: "IS THERE ONE WORD WHICH MAY SERVE AS THE RULE OF PRACTICE FOR ALL ONE'S LIFE?" Confucius answered: "IS NOT RECIPROCITY SUCH A WORD? WHAT YOU DO NOT WANT DONE TO YOURSELF, DO NOT DO TO ANYONE ELSE."

And finally, the emperor Alexander Severus had a sentence engraved on the wall of his palace. It was a sentence that he could rule by. It was an old stoic teaching that went like this, "WHAT YOU DO NOT WISH TO BE DONE TO YOU, DO NOT DO TO ANYONE ELSE."

Those are great teachings aren't they but there is a dramatic difference between those and what Jesus teaches here in verse 12. What is the difference?

The difference is that the other teachings are in the negative but verse 12 is in the positive. It's one thing to not do bad things to others. It's an entirely different thing to actually do good things for others. Not doing to others what we wouldn't want done to us is civility. Doing to others what we would want done to us is nobility. It's the difference between being civil and noble and that's what verse 12 is all about. Kingdom people are noble. They just naturally do the positive things for others that they would want others to do for them.

THE EVEREST OF ETHICS

It's obvious that there's something special about verse 12. That is why it is commonly called "the Golden Rule." I also like what Bible commentator William Barclay calls it, "The Everest of Ethics." Both designations are correct. This statement of Jesus is truly the Golden Rule and the Everest of Ethics. That simply means that along with, "LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, SOUL, STRENGTH, AND MIND," it is the one ethical principle that is above every other. It is so for two reasons.

First, it is all encompassing. Look at the opening words of verse 12, "IN EVERYTHING." Those words are all encompassing. There is literally no activity of our daily lives that it doesn't touch. It governs every situation that we're in and every person that we're with. The fact is, that we act either for or against this principle scores of times each day.

I was in line at a grocery store a couple of weeks ago. I had three items, a box of Little Debbie's, a quart of chocolate milk, and a pack of light bulbs. The lady in front of me had a whole shopping cart of groceries and so quite politely let me go first. She treated me in this small thing like she would want to be treated.

There's a second reason that this ethical principle in verse 12 is above all others. It isn't only all encompassing but all fulfilling as well. Look at that last line in verse 12, "FOR THIS IS THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS." Jesus is referring back to 5:17-19, which teaches that kingdom people fulfill the Law and Prophets. They do that, according to verse 12, by treating others the way they want others to treat them. Treating others the way that we want them to treat us, in other words, fulfills the entire law of God.

Take the preceding verses, 1-11, for instance. The kingdom way is not judging or forcing but asking.

That's the way that all of us want other to treat us. So, if we treat others the way that we want them to treat us, then we'll just naturally do what verses 1-11 instruct us to do.

The Golden Rule then is all fulfilling. It's the one command, that if we keep it, we'll be keeping all the others.

So let's make it, along with loving God with all of our being, the ethical lynchpin of our personalities and lives. That means that we should make it our aim to be the kind of person who lives this way and to keep that aim always before our minds.

The Conclusion 7:13-27

We now at last come to the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount. I've commented before that any good sermon will have a well thought out introduction and conclusion. The Sermon on the Mount does and these verses are that conclusion.

Their theme is quite simply obedience from the heart. Jesus has shown us in His sermon that people who access His kingdom and are inwardly transformed live a certain way. He calls us in His conclusion to be that kind of person and live that kind of life.

He does so by revealing four things that are essential components in becoming that kind of person and living that kind of life.

THE TWO GATES

The first essential component in becoming a kingdom person is found in verses 13 and 14. We must unlike most people desire and take the initiative to become one.

Verses 13 and 14 are widely commented on by Christians. They contain one of Jesus' most penetrating metaphors – the narrow gate with its narrow way and the wide gate with its broad way.

The flow of the sermon interprets what the metaphor means. The narrow gate with its narrow way represents obedience and the state of being that necessary to it. Those on the narrow way are people who do what Jesus wants them to do, who live the life He describes in His Sermon. What they get because they do is life. Life represents life within the kingdom of heaven with all of its blessings and benefits – now and forevermore.

The wide gate represents disobedience. Those on the broad way are people who do what they want to do, who don't live the life He describes in His sermon. What they get because they don't is destruction. Destruction means life outside the kingdom with all of its curses and problems – now and forevermore.

This metaphor teaches us two truths that we must understand, believe, and then act upon if we are going to become kingdom people living kingdom lives.

The first truth is that there is only one way, a correct way, to life. That is what the first gate and way being "narrow" conveys.

There is only one way, a correct way, to blessedness, to well being and joy. That only way is accessing the kingdom of heaven which is at hand. Accessing that kingdom transforms us into a certain kind of person living a certain kind of life. That in turn leads to blessedness, to well being and joy.

Remember what I told you in the first part of our trilogy. People are looking for the power to live. I said that if you can go anywhere else or to anyone else, Islam, Hinduism, new age, Deepak Chopra, Oprah, possibility thinking, the self-esteem movement, and so on and find the power to live – then God bless you. Go there and get the power to live.

But the problem is that none of those philosophies or persons can give you the power to live. There is only one way to life and that one way is by accessing the kingdom of heaven through Jesus.

This metaphor in verses 13 and 14 teaches us a second truth. There are very few people who will choose to access the kingdom of heaven through Jesus. That is what the last lines in both verses convey to us. There will be many on the broad way that leads to destruction but few on the narrow way that leads to life.

Now, most of us equate those on the broad way with unchurched people and understandably so. I mean let's face it. Most unchurched people don't know about let alone believe in the kingdom of heaven at hand. If they don't know about or believe in it, then they certainly aren't going to try to access it. And since they aren't going to try to access it, they don't. And because they don't access it, they aren't the kind of people living the kind of life Jesus describes in His sermon. And because they aren't the kind of people living the kind of life Jesus describes in His sermon, they don't have life.

But sadly, the people on the broad way aren't just unchurched people; they are church people as well. Quite frankly, I've found church people to be as uninterested in accessing the kingdom of heaven as unchurched people are. That is my greatest frustration in fact as a pastor.

Our discipleship trilogy has been going on for exactly a year now. The first part, "The Power to Live," was 127 pages. The second part, "The Sermon on the Mount," which we're concluding, will be approximately 150 pages. The third part, "Spiritual Formation," will probably be at least 100 pages. These materials are all about accessing the kingdom of heaven which is at hand. I have

to say that when I learned these truths about the kingdom that I've shared with you, I was totally stirred and captivated by them. I realized the value of them, that they were what I had been waiting a lifetime to learn. I eagerly applied them to my life and the Holy Spirit was able to transform me because I did. I have grown more in Christlikeness in fact the last eight years of my life than probably the first forty-five combined.

Well, to be honest with you, and it shows my naïveté, I thought that most churched people would be as stirred by these materials as I am. But they aren't. That is so in our church. You can see that we have 13 people here out of approximately 400.

Then there is the individual counseling I do with Christians. These materials are the ultimate and only answer to every problem whether it's addiction, illness, marital strife, anger, financial stress, anxiety, and so on. These materials meet the real need, not necessarily the felt need, but the real need of every person who comes to me. But I've been largely unsuccessful in getting them to even check out let alone commit to accessing the kingdom of heaven which is at hand.

But it isn't just our church. I've tried to have serious discussions about this with laymen, pastors, and leaders of our denomination and others. The only person I've talked to who takes kingdom transformation seriously is former Friends pastor and now Malone College Chaplain Randall Heckert.

I'm not saying that all these people aren't Christians. I am saying that very few of those Christians take accessing the kingdom of heaven seriously. It is a narrow way indeed and the question is "are we on it?"

To be on it, we must desire and initiate accessing the kingdom of heaven at hand. We will then become the kind of person who lives the kind of life Jesus describes in His sermon.

CHOOSING OUR MASTERS WISELY

The second essential component in becoming a kingdom person living a kingdom life is found in verses 15-20. We must choose our masters wisely.

Remember the great commission. Make disciples by teaching them all the Jesus commanded. That shows that we become

disciples by learning what Jesus said. But how do we learn that? Jesus tells us the primary way in verse 15 – through prophets, which refers here to those who lead and teach us.

Let me ask you a critical question to introduce this discussion. Broadly, why do you live the way that you do? More specifically, why do you believe what you believe and thus do what you do?

A man and I were talking about gossip one day. He told me that he doesn't gossip and explained why: "My dad always told me that if you can't say something nice about someone, then don't say anything at all."

What he said illustrates something that is truly significant about us. All of us are disciples of someone. There are no exceptions to this. Certainly, all of us have some of our own independent insights about how to live. But by and large, all of us are disciple of several someone's. All of us have learned how to live from several someone's. Originally, we were disciples of our parents or other family members that we were close to. We then became disciples of teachers, playmates, peers, pastors, or any other number of persons from whom we chose to learn.

All of us have chosen masters in other words. In ancient Greece, individuals chose certain philosophers as their masters – Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, and more. Well, we have essentially done the same thing. We have chosen masters from who we have learned what we believe and do.

One of those masters in our culture is Oprah of course. I often mention her because she claims to be the most influential voice in the world and may just be. What she says on her television show and in her magazine dramatically impacts the thinking and lives of millions of men and women, many of whom are Christians. But whoever it is, the truth is that all of us are disciples of several someone's. All of us have chosen masters from whom we learn what to believe and do.

But notice the opening words of verse 15, "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you." Jesus is telling us that we had better choose our masters wisely because some are false ones. That means that they don't know how to live well. They teach us to believe and do things that hinder kingdom living and the well being and joy to which it leads.

There's a fundamental principle that we need to grasp in that regard. If the master doesn't know how to live well, the disciple won't either. We can only live the way that we have learned.

So, we must make sure that we choose masters who know and teach how to live well. These masters should have at least two characteristics. First, what they teach must be true. It must be consistent with reality. And second, what they teach must be deep. It must take us beyond the surface of kingdom living into the depths.

Commenting on the second of those, I have found that most masters cannot do that. They are sincere Christians but their writings and works are essentially fast food not gourmet to use a culinary metaphor. They cannot take us to the highest levels of well being and joy during this life on earth.

So, we need to choose good masters who can. Doing that requires three things of us.

First, we must identify who our masters are. We need to give this careful reflection and thought and recognize who they are. It is a sign of maturity in our lives when we do this. I have done it in my life. I recognize who my masters are: Dallas Willard, Richard Foster, Oswald Chambers, Tony Campolo, C.S. Lewis, and Ron Sider.

There's a second thing that choosing good masters requires. Once we identify who our masters are, we must then evaluate the results of their teachings in our lives and us. First, are their teachings true or false? If they are false, we must then reject them as our masters. If they are true, we must then move on to a second question. Are their teachings deep? Have they taken us to the depths of kingdom living?

If they have not, we then find new masters who will. That is the third step in choosing good masters. We must search out and discover who the good masters are. This shouldn't be a matter of simply choosing better over good. It should be a matter of choosing best over better. 21st century America Christians are the most privileged people of all people in that regard. We have a wealth of resources available to us that no other people in history have. We don't have time to read it all. So, read and study the best.

In verses 16-20, Jesus gives us one of the most significant guiding principles in choosing good masters. Examine them and determine if they are or are not living kingdom lives.

He gives us this principle by employing one of the most celebrated metaphors in the Bible. That metaphor is the good and bad trees.

In verses 16, Jesus observed that the inside of the tree conditions or even determines the outside. A tree that is good on the inside will bear good fruit. A tree that is bad on the inside will bear bad fruit. What our masters are on the inside, in other words, determines what they do on the outside. That means we can tell if they have kingdom hearts by observing if they're living kingdom lives.

Which is exactly what we should do. I enjoy the way Jesus says it in verse 20, "You will know them by their fruits." We need to be fruit inspectors don't we for our own good. Doing that assists us in knowing whom we should choose or not choose as masters.

T.J. Jakes is a classic example of this. Jakes is one of America's most popular preachers and authors. His books line the bookshelves at Christian bookstores. Millions of Christians, black and white alike, have chosen him as a master. But should they? Is he a kingdom person? According to Jesus, how should we go about answering that question? It is by examining his life.

Well, let's do just that. According to a newspaper article I have, Jakes lives in a \$1.7 million dollar home, drives a new Mercedes, wears expensive jewelry and clothing, and in short, lives an extravagant life. He cannot figure out why some Christians disapprove. He comments in the article that it may be a racial thing – that people think a successful black pastor and author shouldn't live that way.

He just doesn't get it does he? According to Scripture, kingdom people have inner simplicity. They wouldn't even desire that kind of life style let alone acquire it. They would have a generous heart instead that desired to give rather than accumulate. It has nothing to do with race but with the condition of a Jakes' heart. His lifestyle shows that he doesn't have a kingdom heart and I personally would never choose him as a master.

James Dobson is a picture in contrast. He is a master that people can follow with confidence. I've examined his life and found him to be true, from what I know at least.

The first quality of character I look for in a master is humility. That is why I would not normally choose as a master anyone who names their ministry after themselves. I would choose instead a person like Dobson. Listen to the very first of his fund raising guidelines: "THIS MINISTRY BELONGS TO GOD, NOT TO JAMES DOBSON. IT IS NEITHER A MONUMENT TO MY EGO OR A LEGACY TO MY MEMORY. FOCUS ON THE FAMILY DOES NOT BEAR MY NAME . . . THE BUILDINGS ARE NOT DEDICATED TO ME . . . WE HAVE NOT FOUNDED JAMES DOBSON UNIVERSITY. I AM MERELY A FELLOW SERVANT IN THE WORK OF THE KINGDOM."

So, that is how we choose good masters. We must examine them and determine if they are kingdom people living kingdom lives. If they are not, we must not choose to learn from them. If they are and are competent, we can choose to learn from them.

CHOOSING JESUS AS THE ONE MASTER ABOVE ALL

Verses 21-23 reveal the third essential component in becoming a kingdom person living a kingdom life. We must choose Jesus as the one Master above all.

This brings all the way back again to discipleship. A disciple is one who chooses Jesus as their one Master above all. They decide to learn all that He teaches and then to do it.

Certainly, we will not believe all that our other masters teach. We will reflect on what they say in fact to determine if it is true and wise and thus that we should do it. My second master, after Jesus, is Dallas Willard. But I have to say that I don't believe and do something just because he says. I examine and think about it first before I do.

But that isn't the way it is with Jesus. I do believe and do something just because He says. I don't examine and think about it first. I just do it. I act always act upon what he says. That is what these three verses are about.

Look at verse 22 and the words "that day." Jesus is talking about the Day of Judgment here. He means by that time immediately after He comes again when Father God and He judge each of us.

Each of us will stand personally and individually before Him and give an account for the person we were and the life we lived.

Many, no doubt, will try to justify themselves on that day and verses 21 and 22 show us how.

Some, according to verse 21, will argue that they called Him "Lord." People will say that they went to church and claimed to be Christians, maybe even disciples of His, for years. They might even recall some of the conversations in which they claimed that.

Others, according to verse 22, will justify themselves by recalling the extraordinary deeds they did for Him. The three things Jesus mentions here really are extraordinary aren't they – prophesying, casting out demons, and performing miracles.

Both of those things, calling Jesus "Lord" and performing extraordinary deeds for Him, are impressive - to us at least. But they aren't necessarily to Him. According to verse 23 in fact, He's going to tell many who did both of those, "DEPART FROM ME, I NEVER KNEW YOU."

Please try to grasp the staggering implication of this. I once talked to a young Christian who was bothered by the trivialities of his accomplishments for God. He mentioned Billy Graham specifically and all the great things he has done for the kingdom of heaven. He then declared, "IT WILL BE EMBARRASSING WHEN GOD PUTS MY LIFE NEXT TO HIS AT JUDGMENT."

But that isn't necessarily so. It is true that Billy Graham has preached the gospel to more people than anyone in history. But that alone doesn't make him great. That alone doesn't mean that judgment will go well for him.

The basis of judgment isn't calling Jesus "Lord" or doing extraordinary things for Him. It is rather that we learn and do all that Jesus teaches. And what He teaches, according to verse 21, is the will of Father God.

Jesus has revealed the will of Father God in the Sermon on the Mount. His will is that we value people and not treat them with anger, malice and contempt. His will is that we be sexually pure before Him and not lust. His will is that we love and cherish our spouses and not throw them away, and so on. Those who learn these things and act upon them will be great at judgment.

I once counseled a Christian who was thinking about divorcing her husband. She said she was having a hard time deciding what she should do and asked if I could help her. "Have you actually studied in detail what the Bible says about divorce?" I asked. "No, I haven't," she replied.

You see, she hadn't done the very first thing a disciple in her situation would do. She hadn't learned what Jesus says. Her call is to learn what Jesus says about divorce and act upon it.

Let me ask you. What does Jesus and the Bible teach about work, gossip, sports, technology, sex, marriage, criticism, success, and more. Those who learn all that Jesus and the Bible teach and then just do it are kingdom people living kingdom lives. They are the ones who will be great at judgment.

That then is the third essential component of being a kingdom person living a kingdom life. We choose Jesus as the one Master above all. We learn and try to do all that He teaches.

RECOGNIZE THE VALUE OF DOING SO

The fourth essential component is recognizing the value of doing so. That's what verses 24-27 are all about and I can't think of a better ending to Jesus' sermon than this one.

These verses contain one of the most well known similes in the entire Bible. The simile is a simple one really. There are five points of reference in it each of which represents something else.

The first point of reference is the wise man who builds his house on a stone foundation. That represents those who learn and do all that Jesus says – who do the will of God.

The second point of reference is the foolish man who builds his house on a sand foundation. That represents those who don't learn and do all the Jesus says – who do their own will.

The third point of reference is the winds blowing against the two houses. Those winds represent the ordinary and extraordinary challenges of life that everyone has to face.

The fourth point of reference is the house on the rock standing. That represents overcoming the challenges of life and having well being and joy.

The fifth point of reference is the house on the sand falling down. That represents being defeated by the challenges of life and not having well being and joy.

This is the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount and it is a poignant one. It is powerful and to the point.

Those who don't learn and do all the Jesus says cannot stand the challenges of life. The cruelties, pains, and drudgeries of normal living will defeat them spiritually and psychologically. The very best that they can hope for is to cope with life in a non-destructive manner. Did you hear that? That is the best that non-disciples can hope for. I don't care how rich, talented, intelligent, or good looking they are or are not. The very best they can hope for is to cope with life in a non-destructive manner.

But those who do learn and do all that Jesus says can stand the challenges of life. The cruelties, pains, and drudgeries of normal living do not establish the tone of their spiritual and psychological lives. They aren't just coping with life, they're living abundantly instead. Theirs is a life of well being, blessing, and joy.

Those who are foolish do not understand this but those who are wise do. They grasp the value of learning and doing all that Jesus says. And so they learn and do it.

In the end, there is no good reason for not doing what Jesus says. And there is every reason for doing what He says. So, do it!

The Kingdom at Hand

Let me ask you a question, "What was the central message or theme of Jesus' preaching and teaching?" We really do know that answer to that because the Bible tells us. What is it? Does anyone know?

Matthew 4:17 and Mark 1:15 make it clear. The central message or theme of Jesus' preaching and teaching was, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Notice that Matthew 4:17 uses the term "kingdom of heaven" while Mark 1:15 uses the term "the kingdom of God." It's clear that Jesus interchangeably. They mean the same thing in other words. I will be using the term, kingdom of God, in our discussion of it.

Notice what Jesus preached about the kingdom of God. It is at hand. The kingdom of God is at hand. Understanding what that means is central to discipleship and the power to live. So let's try to understand it by breaking it down into two parts. #1 – the kingdom of God. #2 – is at hand.

- **what "the kingdom of God" means**

Let's start with the first part and define what a kingdom is. An analogy will help us do that. That analogy is the King of Morocco. We would all agree that the nation of Morocco is his kingdom.

My question to you though is, "what makes that nation his kingdom?" The nation of Morocco is his kingdom because what he commands and wants done is done in that nation. If he comes to the United States, is the United States then his kingdom? It is not because he has no authority here and what he commands and wants done isn't done here.

That helps us understand what the kingdom of God is. It is the range of His effective will. It is the realm where what He commands and wants done is done.

Matthew 6:10 makes this perfectly clear. In the opening line, we ask that God's kingdom come. In the next line, we ask that His will be done. The second line merely defines the first. God's kingdom is where what He wants done is done.

Now, there are two primary organizing principles and realities in God's kingdom. The first is the person of God Himself, the utterly lovely and competent being we will begin discussing next week. The second is the action of God's will, which means the things that He does. This is what I called the power of God last week. So the person and power of God are the two primary components of the kingdom of God.

Now that we know **what** the kingdom of God is, let's determine **where** it is.

So I ask you that question. Where is the kingdom of God? Where is the realm where what He wants done is done? Can you identify for me specifically where that is?

First, matter is within the kingdom of God. When I say matter I mean atoms in all their combinations and the equations, laws, and formulas that they involve. All the matter in the universe functions as God wills it to function and so it is part of His kingdom.

Suppose you decide to make homemade bread. It rises and then bakes because of a whole series of chemical reactions involving atoms. The atoms and reactions involved in baking the bread function as God wills them to. The bread bakes because those atoms and reactions are part of God's kingdom.

Second, certain institutions on earth are within the kingdom of God. Compassion International is a legitimate Christian organization that exists to meet the basic needs of poverty-stricken children around the world in the name of Jesus. Compassion International is doing what God wants done. It is within His kingdom.

Third, the inner and outer lives of certain individuals are within the kingdom of God. My favorite saint is Francis of Assisi. I just finished reading a biography about him that my son Moses gave me for my birthday. Francis took the commands of God literally and tried to live out each and every one of them. So, his life and he were within the kingdom of God.

So, that is where the kingdom of God is: in matter, in certain institutions, and in the inner and outer lives of certain individuals.

You can infer from what I've said that God permits His kingdom to be absent from certain domains and realms.

First, He permits His kingdom to be absent from political domains. The Taliban government, for instance, with its oppression of women and non-Muslims was outside of God's kingdom. The same is true of communist China's government.

Second, God permits His kingdom to be absent from social domains. American popular culture, epitomized by MTV, is a classic example of this. God's kingdom is absent from American popular culture. Many local school boards and systems are another example of this.

Third, God permits His kingdom to be absent from the person and lives of individual human beings. The vast majority of people on planet earth are doing their wills not God's. His kingdom is truly absent from their lives. I think of the lawyer, for example, who told me, "I'm not going to have some God that I can't see running my life."

I'd summarize it this way. Remember I said that the primary organizing principles and realities of the kingdom of God is the person of God and the action of His will. Everything that obeys and acts consistently with those principles and realities, whether by nature (matter) or choice (human beings) is within that kingdom. Everything that does not obey and act consistently with them is outside that kingdom.

So that's what the kingdom of God is. It is the realm where what He wants done is done. Its primary organizing principles are the person and power of God.

- **what "is at hand" means**

Now let's look at the second part of the central message of Jesus, "is at hand."

A lot of Christians misinterpret what that means. They interpret "at hand" to mean "will soon come." They interpret Jesus to be saying that the kingdom of God will come in the future. That will happen, they say, when Jesus comes again and God's heavenly kingdom is established.

This interpretation has a dramatic practical impact on their lives and them. Since the kingdom of God has not yet come, they think that they cannot experience it in their life on earth. That in turn makes it practically irrelevant to their lives and them right now.

I once taught Matthew 5:43-48 to a small group of Christians. That passage is the one that teaches us to not hate our enemies but to love them instead. During a discussion time, one of the participants in the group said that no one including Christians can do that in this life on earth. We'll have to wait for heaven to do that, he said. My response was that we won't have any enemies in heaven and so this passage is clearly for life on earth.

My point though is that the young Christian who said that sees the kingdom of God as a future reality that isn't available to us now. Consequently, he doesn't live out and experience the Sermon on the Mount. He doesn't even try to in fact since he thinks it can't be done.

But the Greek word translated "at hand" doesn't mean "will soon come." It means "has come." The verb form of the Greek word indicates a past and completed action. It means "**has come.**"

So, when Jesus said that the kingdom of God is at hand, He meant that it is already in existence. He meant that it is right here all around us and has been since the beginning of human history.

But that isn't all that He meant. He also meant that it is accessible to us. The person and power of God are accessible to us right now.

The implication of that is profound. We can experience the kingdom of God, the person and power of God, right now in our earthly lives. We don't have to wait until Jesus comes again to experience it. Two verses make that perfectly clear.

The first is 1 Corinthians 10:11. This verse contains one of my favorite truths in the Bible. Paul says that the ends of the ages has already come upon us. Ends of the ages means our heavenly life. We can experience something of heaven right now in this life.

The second verse is Hebrews 6:5. Paul says here that disciples can experience right now the powers of the age to come. That means that we can experience something of the powers we will have in heaven right now in this life.

You can see how these verses fit into our Trilogy. The first part of it was about "The Power to Live." Well, we get that power to live by accessing or tapping into the life and powers of heaven. That is just another way of saying "by accessing and tapping into the kingdom of heaven."

Now, just because the kingdom of God is at hand doesn't mean that we automatically access it just because we're Christians.

There was a discouraged new convert who was at the point of discarding his faith. Those who led him to Jesus told that he would now experience the supernatural powers of the Holy Spirit in his life. Since that is all they told him, he just assumed that he would automatically experience this power but he didn't. He found himself still getting angry like he did before, being self-centered like he was before, and so on, which is why he was so discouraged.

You see, the people who led him to Jesus failed to tell him something. Just because the kingdom of God is at hand doesn't mean that we automatically access it just because we're Christians. There is something that we have to do to access it.

Dallas Willard compares it to electricity. Willard lived in southern Missouri when he was a child and no one there had electricity. But then the REA extended electrical lines into the area and electricity was at hand.

Almost everyone took the electricity by hooking up to it. But a few people didn't. They didn't want to change or couldn't afford it and so they didn't take the electricity.

That is the way it is with the kingdom of God. It is at hand and available to everyone. Some take it but most don't. They go right on living their lives as if it weren't at hand. That shows us that it is one thing for the kingdom of God to be at hand and an entirely different thing for us to take it.

So take it! That is our call this evening. Do what most Christians don't do. Take the kingdom of God. Access the powers of the age to come. Doing that is a two-step process once we're saved. The first step is learning how to take it. The second step is then doing what we learn.

Bethel Friends provides a core curriculum of studies that teaches you how to take it. They are *The First Aim*, *The Power to Live*, *Out of the Heart*, *The Sermon on the Mount*, *Life after Life*, and *Biblesmiths*.

Learn those materials and then live them out. You will access the kingdom at hand if you do.