QUIET TIME AND DEVOTIONAL SERIES
Matthew 5-7
Inner Action Ministries
Minneapolis-St. Paul Church of Christ
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The Great Adventure

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A few years back I watched a movie about a young man that met a girl that had some sort of strange amnesia. I don’t know if this is even a possibility in real life, but in the world of the movie she had a condition where she would wake up each morning and forget what had happened the day before. In fact, her memory would reset back to a day on which she had some sort of accident, a day that had actually taken place years before. Eventually this young woman and man were married and had children and each morning she would wake up and they would show her a video of their wedding, their life together, and even their children and then she would resume her life but it was as if each day was her first day.

In Lamentations, we are reminded that God is so merciful, compassionate, present, and ready to forgive and love us that each morning for us is like a new morning. If every day with God is like a new day because of his mercy perhaps we should make sure that our relationship with him doesn’t get stale and old on our end of things.

One of the traps that we can fall into is reading certain passages of Scripture so often that they become old hat to us. We think we know them so well that we don’t really let the full impact of them hit us anymore. As we undertake a study of the Sermon on the Mount, both through sermons and this quiet time series, the challenge for us will be to approach this section of Scripture as though it is the first time that we have ever encountered it. If we approach the Sermon on the Mount as though we already know it well, we will probably miss much of what it has to say to us. But if we read it again, “for the first time,” it will challenge us every bit as much as the people who first heard Jesus speak these words.
For the people of Israel, the idea of the Kingdom of God was nothing new. It was something for which they had been waiting for a long time. They could easily have heard Jesus preaching about the coming of the Kingdom and dismissed it as something they had already heard, and some definitely did do that. But this was something new and radical. If they would but open their eyes they would discover that a new light had dawned. Jesus was about to open the door to an entirely new reality.

The Kingdom of God, simply put, is the rule and reign of God in the lives of God’s people. The Jew’s concept of this was Israel itself, but Jesus was calling people to something far more radical. He was calling them not to an external, earthly style rule, but one that reached into every part of a human being. The Kingdom was not just something to be experienced here in the present age, it was to actually begin now to live the life of God’s age to come that no one thought would be possible until the time of the resurrection.

Jesus set about to call disciples, preach that the Kingdom was at hand, and then he would begin to teach them what it looked like to be a Kingdom person. That is what the Sermon on the Mount is all about. It is a picture of a true Kingdom person. These teachings were new and radical for those that heard Jesus. If we are to truly grasp the challenge of Jesus’ words then we must answer his call to follow him and approach these words as though they are new every morning.

- **Read Matthew 4:18-25**
  - What was the response of these men to Jesus’ call of discipleship?
  - Jews understood that, simply put, the kingdom of God referred to the rule and reign of God in the lives of his people. Then to what was Jesus calling these men to as his disciples?
  - Do you occasionally grow weary in your study of God’s word?
  - Does the Bible ever start to seem boring, or like the “same old stuff”?
  - What will it take for you to approach Matthew 5-7 with completely fresh eyes and really carefully consider each and every word as though it is the first time you have heard it?

**Time to Ponder**
- Read and meditate on Deuteronomy 32:1-3 today.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
Every year in the player draft for the National Football League they give a nickname to the very last player chosen in the seven-round draft. He is somewhat mockingly called “Mr. Irrelevant,” and most of those guys don’t even wind up making their teams each year. Although one could argue that getting drafted at all is a certain amount of success, the point of mocking Mr. Irrelevant is that by being drafted last he has somehow failed to be great. We live in a society that is particularly brutal on the failures, although virtually all societies celebrate success and tend to revile and ostracize their failures.

Ancient Judaism was no different. Despite constant calls from the Old Testament to look out for the poor and downtrodden, as a whole Israel didn’t treat their outcasts and poor any better than most societies. That’s why Jesus’ words here are so shocking. We live in a world where the prevailing attitude is that the rich, powerful, and confident will be blessed. But the poor in spirit? Are you kidding me?

As we delve into this first verse of what are known as “the beatitudes” (“the blessings”), I suppose some definitions are in order. “Blessed” in the Greek is a term that is difficult to translate with one English word. Some have tried other words like “happy,” that really miss the mark. If we were not to use “blessed,” perhaps the next best word would be “favored.” It is a term that refers to standing in the right place with God and receiving all that he has in store for us in the life of Christ.

But what about poor in spirit? Spirit is the aspect of us that connects with God. In the Greek of Jesus’ day there were two words that referred to being poor. One was more of someone who was a little low on resources from time to time...
time. But the other term, the one used here, referred to the destitute beggars that had nothing.

This is what Jesus says we need to be spiritually. This is a truly difficult concept for those that grow up in a society that values self-reliance and individualism. Those that find favor with God will be those that are spiritually bankrupt. How can that be? It’s pretty simple really. In the same way that Jesus said that we could not enter into and have his life, the life of the age to come without first dying to our own lives (because you cannot live two lives at once), we cannot grab the great treasure of Kingdom living unless we let go of everything that we think might be valuable in our lives and in the world. We cannot come to God’s Kingdom with a full hand; it must be empty.

But why? Because the Kingdom of God, simply put, is the rule and reign of God in every aspect of our lives. As long as we think we’ve got a little something, we will fight God for control; our will constantly doing battle against his. Being poor in spirit means being a spiritual beggar. It means realizing that we desperately need God every day.

Read Revelation 3:14-18
- What is Jesus’ complaint against the church in Laodicea?
- What is the danger in thinking you are sufficient when in reality you are anything but?
- Why does God want us to see ourselves as spiritually poor?
- What are some of the ways that you can be spiritually self-sufficient rather than a spiritual beggar?

Read Matthew 13:44-46
- What truths does this passage teach us about our need to fully embrace God’s kingdom?

It’s so easy to not want to be a spiritual beggar, isn’t it? We so desperately want to be successful in everything that we do. But Jesus said that we must flip the values of the world upside down. We must value being poor in spirit. And there is a reason that this one comes first. Unless we embrace, understand, and continually return to this characteristic of being spiritual beggars, we will never make it through the great adventure that God has in store for us as his Kingdom people. Perhaps the most difficult part for us to grasp here is that being poor in spirit is not something that we can do, it is something that we must become.

Time to Ponder
- Read and meditate on Isaiah 61:1-3 today.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
When I was a campus minister and spent a lot more time on college campuses than I do now, I used to like to begin conversations asking people if they thought that they were a “good person”. Well over 95% of the people I talked to affirmed that they believed they were. When asked simple questions, though, like if they had ever told a lie, blasphemed God’s name, or looked at another person with lust, most people would respond with, “well, no one’s perfect that just makes me human.” They still, however, would assert that they were a good person.

“Nobody’s perfect” has almost become the rallying cry or motto of our world today. No one seems alarmed over sin. It is as though it is not that big of a deal anymore. After all, nobody’s perfect. But is that the same view of the world that God wants his people to have?

What we see in Matthew 5:3, is that Jesus wants his people to be mourners. We have already seen that he calls us to be spiritual beggars but he also wants us to see the world from his perspective which means to take sin seriously. When we do that, we will truly become the type of mourners that God wants us to be. He wants us to take sin seriously and mourn over it.

- Read Luke 12:14-21
- In this passage we see a man that seems very content with his life
- He is completely blind to his own sin, greed, and the needs of others
- Why is the concept of mourning over sin versus the attitude this man displayed so important to God?

What we must keep in mind is that God is not calling for his people to be depressed and mope through life. He wants us to mourn over specific things but then promises to bring comfort to those who see sin for what it is. God does not promise to comfort everyone who mourns for any reason. He promises to bless those who mourn over the right things. This is primarily the godly mourning over sin that is appropriate when we really understand our spiritual poverty and the monumental offense of sin (including how it hurts God, how it damages us, and destroys the world in which we live).

- 2 Corinthians 7:8-10
- What is the difference between worldly and godly mourning?
- What are the effects of worldly mourning?
What are the effects of godly mourning?
What does genuine godly mourning look like in your life?

God wants us to mourn over the right things. When we do, God promises to bless us and give us his favor. Here are at least five areas in which God will bless us when we become true mourners:

1. When we see sin as God does (Isa. 43:24)
2. When we mourn over our own sin (Psalm 51:17)
3. When we mourn over the sin of our brothers and sisters (1 Cor. 12:26)
4. When we mourn over the sin that oppresses the world (Ps. 119:136)
5. When we mourn over people who reject the gospel (Matt. 23:37-38; Rom. 9:1-5)

It might seem counterintuitive that we must first mourn before we can receive the blessing and joy of the Lord but it makes perfect sense. Until we see things as God does, we will be in step with the world and out of step with the reality of the New Creation life that Jesus wants for his Kingdom people.

Read James 4:8-10
What is your typical response to your own sin?
What does God call for in response to sin?
If those two answers are different, why do you suppose that is?
What is the promise for those that mourn over sin and humble themselves?

Time to Ponder
Read and meditate on Jeremiah 6:13-15 today.
Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
Matthew 5:5

*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

Many people in the history of the world have been put to death. The vast majority of them had no way to stop it or I’m sure that they would have. I would imagine that it is a very small list of those that have willingly been put to death but who would have been able to stop it. I’m not talking about those that don’t resist due to some aspect of their belief system or what have you. I’m talking about truly being able to stop it. In fact, the only example that I can think of that I’ve ever come across is Jesus.

We often think of Jesus being so kind and loving and even smart but we often forget just how powerful he was. The man could walk on water and make the blind see. He had legions of angels at his disposal. He could have taken out the entire Roman army in the blink of an eye without so much as breaking a sweat. Yet, he allowed himself to be mocked, beaten, mistreated, tortured, and killed in the most shameful way available to that society at the time.

Why would Jesus do that? Well, for our sakes, certainly. But what aspect of his character allowed Jesus to do that? The Greek word is “*praus,***” which is the word used here that is translated “meek”. Being meek in this sense doesn’t mean being mousy or a doormat. It refers to one that has more strength than you can imagine. The word was often used of powerful animals that allowed themselves to be bridled. But for humans it refers to one who has a choice to not be controlled but chooses to do so. For God’s people it refers to the one who trusts God so much that they will not grasp for their own self-advantage.

- What are some ways that people typically seek out for their own benefit and advantage?
- What are some ways that you tend to try to get your own way, manipulate, intimidate, or use any other means to get what you want?
- Why do you think that Jesus would call his people to be meek?
- Why do you think that the idea of being meek is so typically reviled in the world?
- Read Matthew 11:29
  - What in Jesus’ life, besides the example of him allowing himself to be killed on the cross, backs up his claim that he was “meek” (he uses the same word used here in Matthew 5:5)?

We often tend to think of the concept of being meek in a negative light. As though it means the lack of any assertiveness or strength. Was Jesus just calling his people to get pushed around, mistreated, never stand up for
anything, and to do it all with a smile? Absolutely not! To truly be meek, one must first have strength. Meek is not a circumstance, it is a choice. The true strength comes from having the ability to go another way but choosing not to.

Being meek is not the absence of assertiveness. It is the lack of self-motivated assertiveness. It is the willingness to not act in one’s own self-interest. It means to willingly give up our own agendas and self-interests and to choose to act on behalf of God’s interests. In short, it is to seek out his will and not ours.

If we truly understand our own spiritual poverty then we will not be people who constantly seek to exalt ourselves, fight for our rights, or get what we deserve. Now here’s the catch: It’s relatively easy to say that we feel that way when it comes to God. It’s so much harder to cast aside self-assertion when it comes to other flawed human beings isn’t it? The meek don’t look to turn every situation to their own advantage but control those desires (see Philippians 2:6 below where we are told, in the better translations, that Jesus “did not consider equality with God something to be used for his own advantage”). They make a choice out of strength rather than weakness.

- Read Philippians 2:1-10 (if possible read it in the HCSB or NIV 2011 versions)
  - Why do you think that Jesus did not use his position for his own advantage?
  - Why is that an example of strength rather than weakness?
  - What are some areas that can see in your own life where you really do seek for your own advantage?
  - What would it take for you to truly look not for your own interests first, but to take care of the interests of others (be as specific as possible)?
  - What stands in the way of doing this already?

Jesus says that those that are meek like him will “inherit the earth.” This is vital to understand. When Jesus returns to renew all things (Matt. 19:28), we will rule with him. Being meek then means that we trust God. We don’t grasp for everything that we can get right now. We don’t demand certain rights, or demand to be treated a certain way, or even demand justice right now. It means that we can possess the life of the kingdom now (Matt. 5:3) but we have faith in God’s promises of a future blessing. We will live in a renewed heaven and earth one day where self-interest will be completely unnecessary. Jesus says if you believe that, you’ll start living that way now.

- Time to Ponder
  - Read and meditate on 1 Peter 2:18-25 today.
  - Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
  - Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
I can only remember one time in my life being so thirsty that I was getting to the point where all I could think about was finding water and nothing else seemed to matter anymore. But even then, I wasn’t despairing of life. That’s the problem for us when we read this verse. We are so well-fed and well-watered that we can hardly relate to the original hearers of Jesus’ words who well knew what it was like to be on the verge of dying for lack of food and water. They lived near desert terrain and knew what it was like to lack water and the measures that people would go to get it. Nowadays we are much more desperate to find an outlet in an airport to plug in and recharge our cell phones than we will likely ever be to find food and water.

But when someone is truly in desperate need of food and water they will do what they have to get it. It becomes the singular focus of your thoughts and efforts as the need for it takes over your entire body. This is the heart that Jesus is calling his people to have when it comes to our need for him.

For what are we to hunger and thirst? It is righteousness. This term doesn’t really primarily refer to some sort of good moral character as many might suppose. It actually has much more to do with justice and being in good standing in the covenant with God and his people. Thus, it is being a faithful member of God’s people to which he is primarily referring here.

There are at least three aspects of that worth considering. The first is our personal righteousness as we seek to do God’s will in all things and be submissive and consistent in our walk with him and remaining in Christ, our dedication to his word, to prayer, and so on. The second is to hunger and thirst for the fellowship of God’s covenant people. And the third is to hunger and thirst for the eventual return of the King when all righteousness will be fulfilled.

- Read Psalm 107:4-9
  - What does this passage guide us to do when we are hungry and thirsty?
  - What is the promise for those that do that?
  - Are you truly hungry and thirsty for God, his righteousness, his word, and his people?
  - If you don’t have the kind of hunger and thirst to which Jesus refers here, what can you do to develop that kind of need?
- Read Isaiah 55:1-3
  - What is the promise here for those that hunger and thirst?
If you don’t feel hungry and thirsty with the desperation that Jesus called for why is returning to the first beatitude in 5:3 so important for you?

Read Amos 8:11

What is the response of people that really are in a famine when it comes to getting food and water?

Does it bother you if you are separated from God’s word or feel distant from God?

What do you do about it when those times happen?

It is quite important here to note that Jesus wants us to *hunger* and *thirst* for righteousness. In other words, he wants us to desire to be in a right covenant relationship with God. Actions are important, but God looks at our desires more than our actions. If our desires are right all of the other things will eventually fall into place.

We really have to take a hard look at ourselves in the mirror on a daily basis and ask ourselves if we are truly desperate for God and his rule in our lives. Are we hungry and thirsty at all? Do we hunger and thirst for the right things? If we’re not careful we can easily start to hunger and thirst for happiness, comfort, security, being blessed, having an easy life, and things of that nature. The problem is that these are not things that God promises to his people. Seeking God’s righteousness means seeking God’s will and that usually heads in the opposite direction than the world’s idea of happiness, comfort, security, and blessing.

Americans can relate to a major problem when it comes to having the wrong appetites and desires. We constantly quench our thirst with sugary drinks that are bad for us and fill our stomachs with the empty calories of junk food. The problem is that when we do this, we lose our appetite for the proper nutrition. We have actually become a society of people that are over-fed and overweight but malnourished. The same thing can happen spiritually.

Read John 6:35

What do you think Jesus meant here?

What do you need to come to Jesus for today?

Read 1 John 2:15-17

What are some of the inappropriate appetites you struggle with?

When we give into those appetites what happens to your appetite for righteousness?

Do you take advantage of the proper spiritual nutritional opportunities or do you fill up with spiritual “junk calories”?

**Time to Ponder**

Read and meditate on Psalm 42:1-5 today.

Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.

Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
Over the better course of my adult life I have gone to great lengths to try to maintain a pretty decent level of physical conditioning. There are many advantages to that, but there is at least one disadvantage. Somewhere over the course of time I got out of touch of what the experience of exercise is like for most people. I began to subtly look down on those that didn’t exercise consistently and stay in shape. It seemed so easy to me and I just couldn’t relate to the reasons that people would start exercising and then quit after a short period of time. I really had no patience for it and made assumptions about their level of discipline and fortitude.

That is until I suffered a neck injury that left me unable to run or exercise at all for about 4 months. When I tried to come back and get myself into condition, I couldn’t believe how difficult it was. My body hurt, my lungs ached when I ran, and it was incredibly difficult to motivate myself to go through that every day. In my weakness, I found a new appreciation for how difficult beginning a physical conditioning regimen really is. It taught me patience, empathy, and compassion for others.

That’s somewhat of a silly little example but there is great truth in it. Compassion and mercy are usually born out of our own trials and weakness. This is why this beatitude of Jesus regarding his people having mercy flows directly out of the first beatitude. When we have truly become spiritual beggars and see our own weakness, only then can we truly become the merciful people that God wants us to be.

Matthew 5:7

7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Why do you think that the Pharisees were so unwilling to show mercy to others? (Remember that they were considered the most spiritual, most knowledgeable, and the most respected people of their day—they were not largely viewed negatively the way they tend to be today)

Why did Jesus apply the call to be merciful to questions about him eating with sinners?

What are ways that you can be like the Pharisees in this passage?

Read Matthew 12:1-7

Why would Jesus apply the call to be merciful to this incident?

What are ways that you can be like the Pharisees in this passage?

In what areas is it most difficult for you to show mercy to others?

If mercy is something that is more difficult for you to give, why do you think that is?
It is so easy, when thinking of what it means to be a kingdom person, to think of so many other things like commitment to the body, prayer, proper doctrine, and so on and not so much mercy. Yet having and showing mercy to others was a central tenet of the faith according to Jesus. As we saw in Matthew 9:9-13 and 12:1-7 (which both allude to Hosea 6:6), one of the primary characteristics that God wants from his people is that they show mercy. One can “sacrifice,” or in other words, do religious things, without truly having the heart of God. But when we show mercy to others it is a demonstration that we are truly understanding the heart of God.

Mercy is often born out of trial. When we truly see our own spiritual poverty we will have more patience, compassion, and mercy for others. When we truly hunger and thirst for righteousness, we will be filled, but Jesus also knew the human tendency that when we start to attain to his righteousness, we can lose sight of him and start to focus on our own spirituality. We then look down on others who aren’t where we’re at (at least in our eyes). This is why throughout the Sermon on the Mount we must return to our first beatitude and remind ourselves to be poor in spirit. A hunger for righteousness without a corresponding level of humility and mercy can turn ugly fast. Failing to show mercy to others is a failure to see our own weaknesses and a complete failure of remaining in God’s mercy.

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**Read Matthew 23:23-24**
- The Pharisees and teachers were doing really well in following all of the little doctrinal points of the Law and being super religious but what had they neglected?
- Why does Jesus compare this to straining a gnat out of their wine all the while swallowing a camel?
- What does it mean for you to show mercy to others?
- Spend some time considering if the Spirit is convicting you about your need to grow in showing mercy to others.

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**Read Matthew 18:21-35**
- Why did the master initially show mercy?
- Why do you think that the servant refused to show mercy?
- Why did the master respond the way he did?
- What is the principle of this parable that we must apply to our own spiritual lives?

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**Time to Ponder**
- Read and meditate on James 2:12-13 today.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as you read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
Matthew 5:8
Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.

When I was a young boy one of the worst insults that you could give to another kid was to call them a “Benedict Arnold.” We used that term to refer to someone who we felt had betrayed us in some way (like going to the store at lunch with a group of girls rather than playing kickball with the guys). We used the moniker without even really knowing who Benedict Arnold was. Later, I learned that he was a general in the American Continental Army during the war for independence from Great Britain. After becoming upset after being passed over for some promotions that he felt he deserved and watching others get credit for his accomplishments, Arnold hatched a plot to defect to the British side and hand over West Point Military Base in the process. His plot was uncovered before it could happen but he did switch sides in the middle of the war.

Since then his name has become a byword for double dealing. Arnold was not singularly loyal because he was not singularly focused on the American cause. He was far more concerned with his own interests.

That’s really the core idea behind this beatitude, to be pure in heart. Biblically speaking, the heart is the deepest seat of one’s will and motivation. To be pure in heart is to be singularly devoted and loyal. It is the complete absence of being double-minded or having divided loyalties. You can’t have your eyes or your will set on one thing and live for something else.

So what does Jesus want us to be singularly focused on? It is the Kingdom of God, of course. He wants us to be pure in our devotion to doing God’s will rather than our own; to being unquestionably devoted and obedient to God.

- Read Matthew 6:22-24
- What do you think that Jesus meant by connecting healthy eyes with a body full of light and unhealthy eyes with a body full of darkness? What is the principle he is getting at here?
- Why can you not serve two masters?
- Read John 6:38
- What was Jesus’ singular focus?
- Are you singularly devoted to doing God’s will in your life?
- What are the biggest areas of struggle with being purely devoted to God’s will?
The greatest pull that we will ever have on our loyalty to God and his kingdom life does not come from Satan or the world, it comes from within us. Our hearts, our will, our desires become set on what we want rather than on God’s will. Romans 8:5-8 reminds us that whatever we have our minds set on, our hearts and actions will follow. We cannot have our mind set on worldly things and please God.

That is what being pure in heart is all about. Jesus is calling us to be loyal to him and to be singularly and passionately devoted to God’s will. Since the Garden of Eden, human beings have given into sin, which simply put, is the act of doing our own will and not God’s. The standard that Jesus is setting for us to aim to is to be pure in heart.

That might seem daunting and impossible but we must remember that the great adventure that Jesus has set us on is to follow down this path of Kingdom living that Jesus has “trail blazed” for us. We are not saved because we live this life perfectly. Being pure in heart is not the standard for us to earn salvation. Because of God’s grace and mercy he has allowed us to enter into the life and identity of his Son, Jesus Christ. As a result of that we get to lay down our own lives and embrace this life of Christ. We get to journey on the great adventure of being transformed into his likeness. Being pure in heart means to be completely devoted (not perfect in action but undivided in desire) to that process because we truly understand the salvation that God has given us.

When we truly go after being pure in heart and undivided in our loyalty, we will, says Jesus, see God. The first aspect of that is that once we are fully committed to doing God’s will, we will see it manifest in our life and we will see God in that way. The second aspect is even more exciting. The pure in heart will one day see God face-to-face. That is something worth being loyal for.

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**Time to Ponder**

- Read Jeremiah 7:1-11
  - God criticizes the people here for claiming loyalty to him, and seeking refuge in the Temple while seeking their own will and oppressing the weak, treating them unjustly.
  - Why is God so opposed to us claiming loyalty to him but living something else?
  - Is the Spirit showing you any ways that you have been like that lately?
- 1 Corinthians 10:31
  - Why important principle does this verse give us?
  - What would you have to change in your life to truly live this out?

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*Read and meditate on Psalm 24:3-6 today.*

*Write out one way that this passage challenges you as you read it today.*

*Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.*

16
Peacemakers - Day 8

Matthew 5:9

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Some of the "Ivy League" colleges and universities in America are among the most anti-Christian organizations of higher learning in the whole country. These places are typically very opposed to true Christian movements and the Christian worldview as a whole. They have become bastions of anti-God and humanistic thinking in many respects. The sad irony is that nearly every one of those universities was founded as an institution to train Christian ministers. Over the years, however, they have become the exact opposite of what their founders intended.

In a similar manner, even reading the Sermon on the Mount at a cursory level makes it obvious that Jesus desired his people to be a people of peace at every turn. Yet somehow, at least in the United States, when you think of the stereotypical person that claims Christianity, you tend to think of a gun-toting, war-hawking group that is ready to annihilate their enemies if they look at them wrong.

With no intentions of engaging in any sort of political discourse of any kind, it must sadden Christ to observe the sad irony that the people he called to be peacemakers are often viewed as anything but.

- Read Isaiah 2:1-4; 11:5-9
  - Both of these passages look ahead in colorful terms at the characteristics of the Messiah's people
  - Why would Isaiah 2 speak of God’s people turning their instruments of war into instruments of peace?
  - Why does Isaiah 11 picture the kingdom of God as a place where natural enemies will get along and trust one another?
  - Why do you think that being at peace with one another and those around us would be such a central aspect of the Kingdom?

The biblical concept of peace carries more meaning than just the absence of conflict. It is not just the absence of danger but the presence of all that is good. To have peace means having a wholeness, or everything that you need. Today we will briefly consider three aspects of the peace that we are to have in order to truly be identified as being members of God's family.

- Read Colossians 1:21-22
  - What was our status with God before entering into Christ?
What are some of the things that God had to go through in order for you to no longer be his enemy but at peace with him?

Before we do anything else, we must make peace with God. Any peace in life to which we try to attain will be fleeting at best if we haven’t truly made peace with God. The first step is to realize that when we are in sin we really are God’s enemies. Only then can we accept the invitation to peace that he has offered us in Christ.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:17-20
- What does it mean for us to be ministers of reconciliation?
- Why would God make his appeal for peace and reconciliation through other human beings rather than directly with each person?
- What does it mean for you specifically to be a minister of reconciliation?

The next important aspect of being peacemakers is to help others come to peace with God. If we are truly seeking the gentleness and meekness of Christ in our lives and understand the importance of being at peace with God then we will not be able to help but answer his call to control our own selfish desires and to live a life focused on calling others into reconciliation with God.

Read Romans 12:18
- What does it mean to live at peace with everyone?
- What are the limits that we are to put on ourselves when it comes to actively making peace wherever we go?
- Hopefully you figured out that there are no limitations that we are to place on ourselves. We are to be radical peacemakers.
- What are the limitations that we might find put on us from others when it comes to making peace?
- Is there any person, type of person, or group of people that you have difficulty making peace with?
- How often do you pray for your “enemies”?
- What is your response when people don’t want to live in peace with you?

We will look more in detail later in Matthew 5 about this final aspect of peace of loving enemies and being people of radical non-violence, concepts that are sorely lacking in modern Christianity, but Jesus here calls us to actively be peacemakers. That means that we will not just accept or hope for peace but we will work towards it wherever we are and whatever we are doing. Could you really say that you are truly a peacemaker in every area of your life?

Time to Ponder
- Read and meditate on 2 Corinthians 13:11 today.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
Matthew 5:10

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

In Plato's famous allegory of a cave he tells of a group of men who are locked up since childhood in a cave where shadows of animals and other objects are flashed on the wall. It is the only thing that these men look at all day and they begin to think of those shadows as the "real world". Eventually one of them escapes and leaves the cave, discovering a whole exciting world of color, dimension, and real animals. When he returns to free the others and tell them of the new world that he has discovered they are frightened and angered and eventually beat the man to death. They would, said Plato, cling to the darkness and shadow of their world rather than accept that there was something far better if they would only believe and follow.

When we consider the previous beatitude, the call to be peacemakers, we might think that there is nothing ahead in life for the follower of Jesus but sunshine and rainbows. Surely everyone will love someone who is seeking to be humble, gentle, and make peace wherever they go. Jesus is calling his people to a radically new and wonderful way of living, yes, but is also dead-level honest. His people, in living by the values of God and his age to come, will be so out of step with the world and their values that the world will hate God's people. Sometimes that will be overtly and violently, and sometimes it will be through subtle prejudice and peer pressure to be like them.

Read John 15:18-20

- What does Jesus mean by saying "you do not belong to the world?"
- What does that mean in terms of his followers and the values, priorities, interests, materialism, etc., of the world?
- In what ways can you tend to be drawn towards "peace" with the world rather than living as Jesus truly called us to and knowing that it will likely mean being considered quite strange by the world, if not outright persecuted?
- Have you really embraced the principle of this passage?
- If not, what do you think is holding you back?

Read 1 Peter 4:1-4

- Here we see the often more subtle "hate" of abuse, mockery, and peer pressure.
- Why do you think that these forms of persecution can be so effective against us?
- Have you ever experienced persecution in the form of mockery or abuse?
- What was your response?
What is the truth given in 1 Peter 4:5-6 that will help keep us from being swayed by such tactics?

It is perhaps true that the cause of all of the problems for Jesus' people begins to stem from the last beatitude, the call to actively be peacemakers. It is one thing to live God's way in a world that is living their own way. The problem comes in when we go out and call people to be at peace with God and reconcile with him. If we were committed to live by the values of God's resurrection age and be people of humility and peace, the world might mock us "behind our back" but they would be more than happy to leave us alone. The world is not bothered when we act like them and they are not particularly bothered if we stay in private with our convictions, but when we go public with our life that looks so different; that calls for peace and lives it; that doesn't retaliate when wronged, and so on; that's when the persecution comes.

But that does not mean that everything bad that happens to a Christian can be chalked up to "persecution for the Lord's sake." For example, if you were a lazy and unreliable employee at work and got fired for that, you cannot rightly turn around and say that it is okay and that you are being persecuted for being a Christian and God is pleased. God is pleased when we do his will and suffer for it without responding in anger, hate, or retaliation.

Read 1 Peter 2:18-21

Why do you think Peter felt it was necessary to state that it is not commendable to before God when we are punished for doing wrong but only when we do his will and suffer because of our love for him?

Take some time and think about whether you are really willing to suffer or be persecuted for God.

We so often like to admire the way that Jesus lived. We meditate upon it, preach sermons about it, and even sing songs of praise about it. But how many of us really want to live as Jesus did? How many of us want to be hated by the world the way Jesus was for simply doing exactly what the Father told him to do?

Time to Ponder

Read and meditate on 1 John 2:6 today.

Write out one way that this passage challenges you as you read it today.

Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
Can you imagine being one of the people of Israel as a young, untested David made his way down into the valley of Elah to take on the fighting champion of the Philistines, the gigantic Goliath who had never lost a battle? Everything was riding on that battle between these two men. The winner's people would rule over the people of the loser. That might sound crazy to us but it was not uncommon in the ancient world for people to share the identity, reputation, and even the fate of one leader or representative. David was not yet ruling as king of Israel but he had been anointed by Samuel and now he was out fighting with the fate of the nation in his hands.

That battle illustrates the common idea in the ancient world that what was true of the king was true of his people. Whatever came the king's way as far as identity, reputation, and power was considered to be inferred on his people. If a king was mighty and righteous, so were the people. But his influence went the other way as well. If he was evil, so the people were considered as such and were, in fact, likely to follow that example.

Read Hosea 4:7-9
- The priests of Hosea's day were acting un-righteously and Hosea knew that, as the spiritual representatives of the people, that they would follow the priests example. What was true of the spiritual leaders was true of the people.

Read Romans 6:1-14
- In what ways do we see the concept of "what is true of the king is true of his people in this passage"?

Read Romans 8:17
- What two things does it say here that we share in with our king?
- How do you feel about the concept of your identity being wrapped up in and really coming from someone else?

When we embrace this Kingdom life to which Jesus is calling us, it immediately and universally brings us into conflict with the values of the world. We live in a world where success is often defined as a life or situation that others envy. That concept must go out the window if we are to remain faithful as God's Kingdom people. We will not have lives, in many ways, that will be envied from...
a worldly perspective. In fact, God's people will often experience insults, violence, and slander according to Jesus.

But Jesus says rather than mourning over this we should rejoice. Let's be honest, though, how could we possibly rejoice over being insulted, being persecuted, or having false things said about us? Jesus gives two reasons. One reason is that it puts us in the company of the prophets, the men who did God's will and spoke out against a world in rebellion against God. They were willing to tell the truth and that often brought them suffering. The second reason is that we will be rewarded by God.

But here is the rub. We must radically change our thinking about what is important and what those rewards are and when we receive them. If we expect worldly rewards for being righteous we will be sadly mistaken. If we think that God has a "wonderful plan" for our lives we will be sorely disappointed. Jesus was reviled by men and put to death by a world that rejected him. He is our King. What is true of the king is true of his people. They hated him, and as a collective whole they will reject us as well. Jesus' reward was from the perspective of heaven, and so will ours be. If we are insulted here, it stinks, but our reward is in remaining faithful. If we are killed, that's terrible, but the reward is that we get to enter into God's presence sooner than we thought. The reward comes in the reality of the Kingdom, not the world. We must detach ourselves from the hope of instant gratification and recalibrate our ideas about rewards, their timing and what they consist of. Ultimately our reward will be the reward that Jesus received: Doing the will of God in this age, come what may from that, and eternity with the Father.

- Read 2 Corinthians 4:17-18
- Have you really embraced this mentality?
- Are you accepting of the fact that as a Kingdom person you might always have less money, less reputation, less accolades, less advancement, etc., than those around you?
- Why do you think that truly accepting those things and following one who had "no place to lay his head" is such an ongoing challenge?
- Write down any areas in your life in which you think you have yet to FULLY accept that. Share them with others and develop a plan to really change your heart about those things.
- What does it mean to fix our eyes on the unseen?

Time to Ponder
- Read and meditate on Galatians 2:20 today.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
Matthew 5:13-16

13 “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

14 “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.

15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

In our times, salt comes in granular form and is used primarily as a spice to improve the flavor of food. But to know what Jesus is really saying here we have to understand a couple of things about salt in their day. In the ancient world salt was used primarily to stop the decay and rotting of meat. For them, salt was typically a piece of rock that was dug up from the ground and so salt was sold and used in rock form to begin with. While in the ground, though, water could wash through it and dissolve the “saltiness,” leaving behind a residue that looked like a salt rock and had the shape of a salt rock but lacked the flavor or preservation properties of a salt rock.

- Read Mark 9:50
- What do you think it means to have salt “among yourselves”?
- What is Jesus calling his people to be when he called them to be the salt of the earth?
- What does this imply about the system of the world?

- Read Ephesians 2:1-10
- Why is it vital to understand that those who are not in Christ are in a world of darkness that is rotting and dead spiritually?

- Read 1 John 2:15-17
- How does this passage provide an important mindset for us if we are to truly be the salt of the earth?
- Are there any parts of the world that you are tempted to love?
- How can you remind yourself that the thing that you are tempted to love is nothing more than rotting meat?

As powerful and impressive as the systems of the world might seem, from God’s vantage point they are little more than rotting meat. God’s kingdom is the cure to that problem. Jesus didn’t mean that his people would solve all of the world’s problem but that Kingdom people would serve the same function as salt. God’s Kingdom would become little samples of preserved meat that were kept from decaying and rotting like the rest of the world apart from God.
That is why Jesus also calls his kingdom people to be the light of the world. We are to become samples of the resurrection age, showing people what it looks like to live in peace and love with one another under God’s rule. That should serve as a light to the world and be a sharp counter-point to a world in darkness. In a time where lights in the darkness were at a minimum, it would have been absurd to light a lamp and then cover it up.

- Read John 8:12; Isaiah 49:6
  - Both of these passages speak to the role of the Messiah, the perfect representative of God’s people
  - What is the connection between the Messiah being the light of the world and this call from Jesus for his people to be the light of the world?
  - Do you ever cover your lamp? In what ways?
  - In what ways can a whole church cover its lamp?
  - How can we cover our lamps with unrighteous living?
- 2 Corinthians 5:20
  - Is it exciting or more daunting for you to think of God making his appeal to the world through his people?
  - What obligations and responsibilities does that put on God’s people?
  - What does it mean for you on a daily basis (at work, at school, in your neighborhood, etc.), for you to be an ambassador of God’s Kingdom?
- Read Ephesians 3:10-11
  - How can God’s wisdom be on display through the church?
  - What are ways that we can be an obstacle to God’s wisdom being displayed through the church?

**Time to Ponder**
- Read and meditate on 1 John 1:5-7 today.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
Matthew 5:17-20

17 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. 19 Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

When I was a kid I enjoyed watching professional wrestling. One of my favorite wrestlers at the time would strut around the ring confidently and then after fully getting the attention of the entire crowd, begin his monologue that was meant to hype up interest in his next match. Somewhere during every one of these monologues or interviews with an announcer he would utter his famous phrase, “to be the man, you have to beat the man.” I always loved that phrase; it seemed so direct and confident.

In a sense, it almost seems like that is what Jesus is telling his Kingdom people as he continues his description of what it looks like to grasp onto the life of the Kingdom of God which, as we should remember, is primarily the rule and reign of God in the lives of his people. To really understand what Jesus is saying, though, we cannot flatten out the Pharisees into our modern conception of them. In their day they were the most respected, the most knowledgeable, and considered to be those in closest relationship to God (righteousness) in many ways. Imagine, then, how initially intimidating it would have been to hear Jesus say that the righteousness of a kingdom person must surpass their righteousness. To be the man, they had to beat the man. But what did that mean?

Righteousness is primarily about relationship. It is standing in the right place with God and being faithful to his covenant. It is about having a relationship with him and the people that he loves. This is what Jesus was getting at. The Pharisees fulfilled the Law by making even more laws and turning it into a set of rules for every occasion that could be followed by a disciplined individual for all the wrong reasons without ever changing who they were. We have to exceed their righteousness but Jesus was re-defining the term. We’re not going to beat the Pharisees at their own game. We have to first embrace God’s idea of “righteous” and then we will surpass their concepts of righteousness.
Read Jeremiah 31:31-34
- What would be the difference between the Law during the Old Covenant and the role of the Law under the promised New Covenant?
- What God wanted was a Law that was written in people’s hearts and that transformed who they were from the inside rather than conforming who they appeared to be on the outside.
- Are there times when you can turn God’s word into an Old Covenant style Law by obeying it outwardly but not really allowing it to transform who you are internally?
- Are there times when you reduce God’s word to things you do rather than allowing it to cleanse your heart and focus on your love for God and others?

Read Mark 12:28-34
- Why do you think that Jesus summed up the entire Law by calling his people to these two standards?
- Why is fulfilling the Law through these means much more difficult than simply fulfilling a bunch of rules, as stringent as they may be?

Read Romans 13:8; Galatians 5:14
- Why would fulfilling the Law in this way surpass the type of righteousness that the Pharisees embraced?
- What are some ways that you see Christians today embracing a more “Pharisaical” type fulfillment of the Law?
- Do you ever see yourself drifting towards a life that does things because you feel like you have to out of obligation rather than focusing on your heart and doing things out of a genuine love for God and others? (Please don’t fall into the trap of not doing things for God’s Kingdom because “your heart’s not there” and you don’t want to “be a Pharisee”. If your heart’s not there, then get alarmed and do something about that immediately.)

Jesus’ point here was that he hadn’t come to wipe away God’s Law. Quite the contrary. He had come to live it out perfectly and show people what God really had in mind. He didn’t want just rules and religious living. You can’t ever make enough rules to tame the human heart. What we need is to transform our hearts to be like God. That’s what the Kingdom of God is all about. It is easy for us to get focused on Christianity like it is a set of minimum requirements but that’s not what God wants. He wants us to have new hearts that desire to bring him glory in everything we do.

**Time to Ponder**
- Read and meditate on Matthew 9:13 today.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
Matthew 5:21-26

21 “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder,’[d] and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’
22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister[e][f][g] will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’[d] is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.
23 “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you,
24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.
25 “Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison.
26 Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

I was not a happy camper. I had returned home from the store to discover the ornately painted ostrich egg that we had purchased in South Africa now had a big crack down the side. I had left our then 8 and 16 year old sons at home for a few minutes while I ran to the store. When I inquired about the crack it quickly became obvious that the younger one had been playing baseball in the house. Using his bat, he had hit a ball which had nearly miraculously made its way through the house, connecting with none other than this fragile egg. I asked our son how this had happened, especially with him knowing that there was already the standard of not playing catch in the house. He confidently asserted that he shouldn’t be in trouble because he wasn’t playing catch, he was batting a baseball and that’s clearly a different activity that wasn’t banned previously.

Needless to say, although it was a valiant effort, he still received some discipline. His problem was that he was trying to interpret our standards tightly as specific rules and then look for the minimum standard. That’s kind of the way that the US legal system works. If there’s not a specific law worded exactly correctly for what I have done then I’m innocent. Rather, I had to teach our son that the standards in our house are principles that should be guided by common sense and a deep desire to maintain the integrity of the house and our authority as his parent. That’s the way we need to approach the Sermon on the Mount. They are not a new list of rules. What we have in the next several verses is six examples or principles of Jesus that illustrate lives that have embraced the beatitudes as their standard. Jesus is not erasing the Law but showing it to be a guiding principle as it was always intended and not just a list of minimum requirements and rules.
There are two primary principles that Jesus gives in this section. The first is that we must respect all people. Yes, murder is bad, but he is calling his people to a standard much higher than just avoiding murder. Murder is just a symptom of someone who has devalued another human being. Jesus goes right to the heart of that and says that we shouldn’t condescend to or even insult others. To not murder them is just a start. Jesus wants people who understand that the real problem, though, is in our heart. When we turn our frustration towards a person and make it personal we are displaying the same heart attitude that results in murder. Instead, we are to be a people that know only the language of love.

The second principle is to realize that the goal of kingdom people is not just to not murder or even not hate, but to reconcile relationships. We are to constantly be people who go to great lengths and every possible means to be in reconciliation with one another.

Time to Ponder

Read and meditate on 1 John 3:16 today.
Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
Matthew 5:27-32

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

31 “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ 32 But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Let’s try a little activity today. Take out five pieces of paper and crumble up four of them. Leave three of them crumbled up pretty good but take one of the crumbled pieces and try to smooth it out to the best of your ability, making it look as close as possible to the original state. Once your finished, set all five pieces next to each other and observe them for a moment. What do you notice? Your probably notice that the paper you straightened looks much better than the crumbled ones but still not like the one that was untouched.

In a sense, the Sermon on the Mount is doing for us what you did for that piece of paper. It is un-crumbling us from a world of sin and self-destruction. At every turn the standard is far higher than that of the world around us and will help us straighten our lives out a great deal but it will never complete erase the wrinkle lines and the ramifications of sin. We will have to wait for the resurrection for that complete restoration job.

- What are the prevailing attitudes in our world today concerning topics like adultery, lust, and divorce?
- What are some of the devastating negative effects in the world that would be gone if adultery, lust, and divorce were gone from our midst?
- Why do you think that Jesus chose to speak out about lust? Why is it so dangerous?
- Read 2 Samuel 11:1-17
  - What were the results of David’s unchecked lust?
  - How can lust harm us?
  - How can lust harm others, including the one after whom we are lusting?
- Read Job 31:1-12
  - What did Job learn about lust?
  - What was his response to the temptation to lust?
  - What can you learn from his response?
- Read 1 Timothy 2:9-10
What role does dressing and behaving modestly (for both men and women) play in the purity of God’s people?

What responsibility do we have to one another when it comes to modesty and lust?

Should our standards of modest dress and behavior come from the world’s standards or should it look very different?

Just as our standard for lust and modesty (as well as adultery) should be much higher than the world’s so should the seriousness of our response to these things. Obviously your right eye can’t sin without your left eye doing so as well, so Jesus is speaking hyperbolically here, but the point is that we need to get extremely serious about the sins of the heart. We cannot help that tempting thoughts come but we can choose to entertain them or deal with them. We must remember, though, that lust is the desire to take for oneself. While love is the choice to give to others. Thus, the opposite of lust is not “not lusting,” but to fill our minds with pure and noble things; the opposite of lust is to love.

Read Matthew 12:43-45

What is the principle from this passage that is an important reminder when it comes to controlling our minds and guarding against lustful thoughts?

Read Philippians 4:8

What does this verse teach us that is invaluable when it comes to controlling our mind against lustful thoughts?

What are some practical ways that you can discipline your mind and turn your thoughts to righteous things when you are tempted?

Space does not permit a long discussion of Jesus’ view of divorce here, but suffice it to say the goal for a kingdom marriage is a lifelong commitment. Marriage is based on the unbroken relationship that Adam and Eve had before sin entered into the picture (Genesis 2:24). The purpose of marriage is to teach us about our relationship with Christ and for kingdom people to take the marriage covenant lightly is not part of God’s will.

Read Ephesians 5:21-32

What is the ultimate purpose of marriage described here?

Read Proverbs 5:15-20

What does this passage teach us about remaining faithful in our marriages?

Time to Ponder

Read and meditate on Proverbs 5:21-23 today.

Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.

Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
Matthew 5:33-42

33 “Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.’ 34 But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. 36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. 37 All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one. 38 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ 39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. 40 And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. 41 If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. 42 Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

We live in a world today that has nearly perfected the art of twisting and analyzing anything that is said so that, in the end, we can do what we really wanted to in the first place. We live in a world where Presidents can quibble over what the definition of the word “is” means, and many applaud him for his ingenuity in wriggling out of a sticky situation by using such creative legalism.

Yet, we shouldn’t be too quick in shaking our heads, because many of us do the same thing when it comes to Jesus. We read what he said, and then we quickly make up all kinds of excuses and technicalities as to why he didn’t really mean what is looks like he said. That is especially true of this passage and the following one. Commentaries are full of explanations that soften and “civilize” the radical words that Jesus spoke, saying confidently that Jesus was using hyperbole (when Jesus uses hyperbole it is an obvious impossibility such as your right eye not knowing what your left is doing) and didn’t literally mean some of the things he said here. They do that all the while ignoring that the early church of the first three centuries took him seriously, took him at his word, lived it out, and changed the world because of it. Perhaps we don’t have the impact today that those early Christians had because we insist on seriously wrestling with the life that Jesus is actually calling us to.

- Read Mark 7:5-13
  - The Pharisees had become very good at finding legal ways to wriggle out of following some of the more demanding aspects of God’s word
  - What was Jesus’ response to them doing so?
  - What conclusion does he draw about their hearts in those situations?
  - Why must we be careful to take Jesus’ difficult words and face value rather than quickly come up with some extreme scenario where his way
wouldn’t seem to work and then summarily dismiss everything else as though we don’t have to obey him now?

➢ What is flawed about that line of thinking?

Jesus consistently pushes us not only out of our comfort zone but way past the norms of what is considered fair, just, or even wise in our societies. The Old Testament called people to not break oaths in a world where that was common, but Jesus said to have such a radical honesty that you don’t even need oaths. The Pharisees had come up with all sorts of oaths that could be broken but Jesus wanted his people to not try to manipulate situations for their own benefit.

That would be challenging enough, but Jesus went further with four incredible examples of not putting ourselves and our own rights first. First, rather than being limited to the Old Testament standard of eye for an eye (which was a limiting law intended to discourage revenge that went beyond the original injury), kingdom people are not to resist or seek retribution at all. Second, rather than responding to an intentionally insulting back-handed slap, kingdom people are not to be weak but are to make a gesture of willingly surrendering our rights and choosing to respond in non-violence and non-retribution by offering the other cheek as well. That is not weakness but great strength and self-control. Third, if someone wants to sue you for what they could legally, make clear to them that you are living by a different standard by going above and beyond the law, which Jesus symbolized by saying that his people should give away their cloak, an item that was legally off limits. Finally, he uses an example of people being pressed into service by the authorities. Rather than fighting for your rights or being angry and resistant the way most would (or submitting out of fear), kingdom people would show a radically different way. They would fulfill their service and do extra to show that they were willingly choosing humility and submission. All of these responses, then, were designed to show that kingdom people were intentionally choosing a very different way of living.

➢ Each of these examples that Jesus gave were principles of Kingdom living rather than situation specific rules.
➢ What do you think is the general principle of each of these five situations?
➢ Give examples in your own life of how each of these principles might be lived out.
➢ What is the most challenging thing for you about these principles?

Time to Ponder

➢ Read and meditate on Isaiah 50:4-11 today.
➢ Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
➢ Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
Love Them? - Day 16

Matthew 5:43-48

43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor’[i] and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

The other day my youngest son said something that sounded pretty prideful regarding himself. When I corrected him gently and reminded him about our constant need to pursue humility, he looked at me and said, “Dad, I’m not being prideful, I’m just being honest, so I’m still humble.” I do believe he has the concept of humility twisted just a bit at this point. But before we chuckle too much at his youthful ignorance, we should realize that we can often be just as guilty of twisting biblical concepts to fit our liking.

Take that of “loving our enemies,” for instance. We can see a passage like this and decide that as long as we’re not actively trying to actually murder our enemies that we are loving them (although many of us seem to have this strange idea that Christians can be in support of bombing our enemies because somehow Jesus’ words don’t apply in those situations). This is one of those passages that we must truly let wash over us as though we’ve never read it before and let the full thrust of Jesus’ words hit us square in the face. Love your enemies. It does not say, just bite your tongue and don’t respond but still seethe away inside. It does not say smile to their face but be sure to really trash them to others when they’re not around. It does not say to just avoid them and/or avoid conflict with them. It certainly doesn’t say to shoot them before they shoot you. It says to love them. That sounds crazy and it is...from a worldly perspective. But that’s what we are called to do. In fact, we are also called to pray for them and do good to them. Now that’s challenging.

Read John 15:13; 1 John 3:16

- What does it mean to “love” someone biblically?
- Jesus was not calling us to have great affection for our enemies but to love them biblically. But we must ask who are our enemies?
- Our enemies are anyone who will not reconcile a relationship with us, who will not forgive us, who respond to our love with rejection, and to our serving of them with no positive response at all.
- How do you feel about loving those people?
- What is most challenging about that for you?
What are some of your questions or concerns about loving your enemies? How can you get those questions answered?

At this point it is easy to think of all the potential pitfalls of trying to love those who do not love us. The reality is that most of those things could be true. It doesn’t make a lot of sense from the perspective of what works in our world to love enemies. It might positively impact a few, sure, but often times it makes them have even more enmity towards us and it probably will anger a few of our “friends” to have them see us loving those that they also consider enemies.

But that’s the whole point. This is something that those who do not follow Christ will probably never do. We’re not talking about simply being non-violent or not responding in hate to those who mistreat you, but about actively loving them, choosing to sacrifice for them, and actually doing good to those that would do nothing of the kind to you. The normal person does good to those that love them. The extraordinary person does not respond to the one who harms him. But the kingdom person does good to the one that hates them. But why? Simply because we are a people that are called to start living by the values of God’s eternal Kingdom right now. The final state of that Kingdom will be a place of no evil, no hate, and no enemies so we must strive to be a people who know none of those things now. We know only the language of love so it is all we speak even when we are spoken to in the language of hate.

Jesus’ final statement can really throw us for a loop. I can never be perfect, we think in frustration, so why even try? But the word translated “perfect” means “complete” or “mature.” His point is not that we should be sinless like God, although that is the constant goal for which we strive, it is our great adventure. His point is that God loves both friend and enemy without discrimination. His love is complete and so should ours be. Do you truly try to love every enemy in your life and in our world?

**Time to Ponder**

- Read Luke 10:25-37
  - The challenging point of this story is not that the Samaritan did good to a stranger but that he did good to an enemy.
  - How do you treat your enemies?
  - Do you speak poorly of them? Do you call them names? Do you show your anger to them? Do you try to get even or put them in their place? Or do you actively love them like this Samaritan?
- Read Romans 5:10
  - What did God do for when you were an enemy of his?
  - What can you do today for someone you consider your enemy?

- Time to Ponder
  - Read and meditate on Romans 12:14-21 today.
  - Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
  - Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
Which is It? - Day 17

Matthew 6:1-4

1 “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.
2 “So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.
3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

I have a relative who is an extremely active person in the area of helping others. She volunteers for many different causes and even runs a few events to help others out. The work that she does is very helpful to others but there’s an interesting element to it. She is one of the most self-promoting people you will ever see. She consistently takes pictures of herself serving and routinely touts the things that she does on social media forums. She is even not adverse to getting nominated frequently for contests that award those that serve in the community, and she will tirelessly promote herself and encourage others to vote for her so that she can win some prize or another.

I don’t say all of that to put down her efforts but it does serve as a somewhat extreme example of what Jesus is talking about here. There is the concept of doing acts of righteousness such as giving to the needy, praying, or fasting (this chapter will discuss all three), and then there is doing them to be seen by others.

But that raises an interesting dilemma. Didn’t Jesus encourage his people to do acts of righteousness in public so that they are seen (5:16). So is this a contradiction? Not at all.

Read Matthew 5:16

- What is the purpose and result of letting the acts of righteousness of God’s people be seen as a bright light?
- Who gets the glory?
- What is Jesus warning against in 6:1?
- Who gets the glory in that scenario?
- What is the result if our goal is to be seen by others?
- Do you ever engage in acts of giving or kindness and discover that you really want to be noticed for doing so?
- Do you ever find yourself doing good but realize that your motivation has become more about being seen doing good by others than simply pleasing God and bringing him glory?
- When that happens, what has your true motivation become?
- What becomes your reward in those cases?
This section might seem like a radical departure from the previous challenges to go to the heart level with our faith rather than just doing the religious thing on the outside, but it’s really not. We have hearts that can be so easily drawn to desire praise and attention from man and not keep our hearts truly focused on God. We can easily start to value that praise and do things just to be seen rather than because we have hearts that genuinely want to love others and serve God.

Jesus assumes that his people will do good to others and give to the needy (giving to the poor, praying, and fasting were considered to be the big three when it came to acts of righteousness in the Jewish world) as he says “when” you give to the needy. Ultimately, though, there are three motivations for doing good to others. First, we can do it with trumpets (an exaggerated example to make a point) so that others will praise us. Second, we can do it and become focused on our own goodness and praise ourselves. That is what Jesus was discouraging when he urged to not let your left hand know what your right is doing. Or the third option is to give in secret in our hearts so that what we do might be seen by others but the desire for praise and reward is restricted to God alone. We do it with no motivation to bring glory or attention to our selves.

The fact is that Jesus was not demanding that everything done for the poor be done secretly. Some of it may be. But eventually if we are the same person in public as we are in private, our good deeds will become public knowledge. The key is what our motivation is. To whom are we truly desiring to receive glory. Is it God or ourselves?

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- Read John 12:43
- What are some of the potential dangers in our lives if we fear men more than God?
- Are there any areas in your life in which you feel tempted to fear man more than God?
- If there are, what is the solution to that problem?
- Read Proverbs 27:2
  - What is the warning in this verse?
  - What is the potential danger in “letting others praise us”?
  - How can you find the balance between letting others praise you but not doing things so that they do?

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**Time to Ponder**

- Read and meditate on Luke 17:7-10 today.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
Praying Differently - Day 18

Matthew 6:5-8

5 “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 6 But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. 7 And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

A few years back I watched a television evangelist over the course of several weeks as he gave a series of speeches on prayer. His central point was that God is very specific about how we pray. He constantly claimed that there were certain formulas to prayer and that if you didn’t follow one of those specified formulas then your prayers would not be heard. If you followed the prayers, however, then God was obligated, he said, to answer your prayers. He even asserted that if you ended your prayers incorrectly, that it would cancel out your prayer and it would be void. In the end, it wound up sounding very much like a legal contract that one might find in the world today. I’m overjoyed that prayer doesn’t really work like that and that we don’t have to follow the world’s wisdom and way of doing things when it comes to God.

Jesus dealt with a similar problem in his day. The pagans prayed a lot but it mostly came down to trying to manipulate their gods. They didn’t and couldn’t trust their gods so they would try to impress them with coming up with as many names and titles as possible with which to address the god and then giving prayers that were full of words and repetitive phrases. This was all meant to impress others with how pious they were and to impress the god to work on their behalf.

What is the criticism of prayer that Jesus offers in verse 5?
- Why is loving to pray to be seen by others such a danger?
- Do you love to pray publicly so that you can impress others?
- Are your public prayers more “impressive” than your private prayers? If so, why do you think that is?
- What is the reward for someone who has this type of heart in praying?

Read Luke 18:9-14
- What do you think was the Pharisees’ motivation behind praying?
- What do you think was the tax collector’s motivation behind praying?
- What is the difference in God’s response when we approach him with humility?
Which one of these two motivations most closely resembles your own motivations right now?
What does it take to have the right motivation for our prayers?

In this passage of Matthew we find no formulas or rigid demands concerning prayer but we do find three important truths. The first is that true prayer is private. That doesn’t mean that we can’t ever pray in public. The New Testament is full of believers praying together. This has to do with our motivation. We should pray privately and publicly, but even when we pray publicly it must be between us and God and not to impress others.

The second truth is that true prayer is simple. Some people are eloquent, others are not and if you’re naturally eloquent that’s fine, but prayer is not about manipulating God. We don’t suddenly have to use an impressive prayer voice, slip into the King’s English, master the right prayer techniques, or roll off an impressive string of titles and names for the Father. We can just go to our Father simply and humbly and he will hear.

The third truth is that true prayer is confident. We can be confident in our prayers and that they will be heard and answered in God’s way and timing because of his wisdom and greatness, not ours. Prayer is not a performance but a connection with our Father. Our Father doesn’t need to be manipulated, he simply wants to spend time with us and have us learn through prayer that we need him. Prayers is more about us learning to rely on God than actually having to get the words just right.

Read Romans 8:26
Have you ever had times when you were praying but just didn’t seem to know what to pray for or the “right” words to use?
What does this verse encourage us with when it comes to prayer?
By Jesus’ time, the Jews had a standard list of prayers that they typically memorized and recited each day. They were good prayers but it really removed their need to connect with God at a heart level.
What has your prayer life been like lately?
Are you motivated by your humility and need for God?
Do you truly engage your heart when it comes time to pray or has it slowly become a routine in which you engage without putting much thought?
1 Corinthians 14:15
What do you think it means to pray with our spirit?
What do you think it means to pray with our mind?

Time to Ponder
Read and meditate on 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 today.
Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
Pray Like This - Day 19

Matthew 6:9-13
9 “This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. 11 Give us today our daily bread. 12 And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

For many years as a school-aged boy I went to a private Christian school. I enjoyed the school and have many fond memories. One of the regular things that we had to do at that school was to memorize Scriptures. Each month we would have a new and fairly long passage of Scripture to memorize. I always went after that with great zeal and was one of the best at it, but there was just one problem. I could recite the words of the passages that I memorized but I couldn’t tell you what they meant and I certainly had little notion of actually living them out.

This passage, known as the Lord’s Prayer, has become one of the most well-known passages in all of Scripture. It seems as though virtually everyone can recite this little model prayer but far fewer ever stop to consider the implications of it. Today we will look at several elements of this prayer that Jesus intended not to be something to simply be memorized and recited but to serve as a model and mission statement for his Kingdom People.

We should note that the prayer begins with a reminder that we are in this together. He is “our” Father. Christianity is a team sport. But he is also our “Father.” He is not a distant and detached God but one into whose presence we can go whenever we wish, and he has brought us in to his household.

Read 1 John 4:19-21
Why is it vital to know that he is “our” Father and not just “my” Father? Is this corporate aspect of Christianity challenging for you?

Once we have established that we are on a team and that the team belongs to our Father, Jesus moves to understanding the location. Heaven is not some remote floating city in the sky. It is the place of God’s presence. Where he goes, heaven goes with him. Since God is perfectly holy and heaven is the
place of his presence, this is a good reminder that to enter into the presence of God, heaven, is to enter into his holiness.

- Read Hebrews 10:19-23
  - When we pray, we are allowed access into God’s very presence. Is that something you can tend to take lightly and flippantly?
  - Do show respect for prayer both in your attitude when you pray but also in your commitment to it?

The next part of the prayer offers up three petitions that are similar in nature:
May your name be holy; May your kingdom come; May your will be done. In a sense, these are all saying the same thing in slightly different form. The Kingdom of God is the rule and reign of God in the lives of his people. Thus, his name being held as holy and his kingdom coming is the act of his people doing his will as it is done in the realm of his presence, heaven.

- Read 1 Peter 4:1-2
  - When and where can God’s will be done in your life?
  - When and where can God’s will not be done in your life?
  - What aspect of doing God’s will and not yours is the most difficult for you?

The final portion of this model prayer that shows us the key elements and attitudes of Kingdom Life contains four more petitions. While the first three have to do with us drawing near to God’s will, these last four have to do with recognizing our constant need for God: May we have our daily bread; May we be forgiven as we forgive (a thought that is so vital that Jesus will return to it and so we will spend tomorrow’s devotional focusing on this concept); May we be protected from temptation; May we be protected from the evil one. At the heart of each of these is a call back to the first beatitude and the recognition of the fact that we need to be poor in spirit. We need to fully rely on God or we will not be able to do his will.

- Read Mark 4:24-25
  - How does this relate to our need to receive our “bread” daily?
- Matthew 26:41
  - How does this relate to being delivered from temptation?
- Ephesians 6:10-18
  - How does this relate to being delivered from the evil one?

**Time to Ponder**
- Read and meditate on 1 Corinthians 10:6-13 today.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
Matthew 6:9-13

14 For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Quite a few years ago now when our youngest son was about four, he and his mother were having a discussion about forgiveness and Jesus’ call to forgive seventy times seven times. My wife explained that this was 490 times but our wonderful son, who has always taken to the letter of the law, took that number a bit too literally. He informed his mother that he was going to forgive people 490 times and that was it. She tried to explain to him that Jesus was using a ridiculously high number to make the point that we should always forgive those that sincerely repent and want to be forgiven. In all seriousness this little four year old looked at her and said, “Mom, Jesus said 490 times, and that’s all I’m forgiving someone. After that they are on their own.”

It’s a funny little story, but the not-so-funny part is that we can often have a similar attitude; only we tend to put a much lower number on it. Most of us are not very good forgivers. Even if we do say we forgive someone, not holding grudges and keeping a record is an entirely different matter. Or many times, we just feel that someone has wronged us too many times or the offense has been too severe and we refuse to really offer full forgiveness from our heart. We always have good justifications in our own minds, but the really scary part comes right here in Matthew. If we don’t lavishly forgive others who have sinned against us, then our Father will not forgive our sins. We can try to soften those words all we like, but they mean what they say, and that’s downright sobering. The fact that Jesus mentioned this topic but then returns to it at the end should show us just how serious he is about forgiving one another.

- What kind of forgiver are you?
- Does genuine and full forgiveness come easy to you?
- If not, why do you think that forgiveness can be difficult?
- Is there anyone that you know you have yet to forgive or truly forgive fully from your heart?
- Take some time to meditate on all for which God has forgiven you.

Why would God do such a thing? Doesn’t God forgive us without any merit on our part? How can our forgiveness from him be hinged on the way that we forgive others? It’s simple really. In order to truly accept God’s grace and forgiveness we have to understand how sinful we really are and how great his mercy truly is. Because it is such an important issue he has given us a wonderful monitoring system to check and make sure that we really have
grasped and remain in his realm of forgiveness and grace. If we really understand the nature of our offenses and God’s forgiveness of us, then we will readily and willingly want to show that same kind of mercy to others. That’s not to say that we will do so perfectly or it won’t be a struggle at times, or even that genuine forgiveness won’t be a process in some cases. But we need to have hearts that want to forgive, strive to forgive, and won’t rest until we have reconciled any relationship that we can because that is what God has done for us.

Read Matthew 18:21-35
- What was the amount that the first servant had forgiven by the master?
- What was the amount that he refused to forgive his fellow servant?
- What was the response of the master?
- Why do you think that God has such a high standard for forgiveness?
- Do you actively seek to forgive others in light of how much forgiveness God has given to you?

Read Hebrews 8:10-12
- When God is said to not forgive and no longer “remember” our sins it means that he will not “act” on them, or in other words he will not treat us as sinners
- Is that how you forgive? Do you forgive others when they repent or ask forgiveness and then no longer treat them as violators (although that doesn’t mean that we can remove all of the consequences of someone’s sin)?
- Is there anyone that you say you have forgiven but you still “remember” their sin?

Time to Ponder
- Read and meditate on 1 John 4:7-10 today.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as you read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
Matthew 6:16-18

16 “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

When I was a new Christian I learned about the concept of fasting. The church had several regular days of fasting but I was less than excited about this. I saw no good reason to willingly deprive myself of food but I felt that I should participate in what everyone else was doing. So, in fine Pharisaical fashion, I set about finding the minimum requirements for myself and looked for loopholes. If fasting was about staying away from food then I reasoned that liquids were fine. So I had a sports shake for breakfast, a chocolate shake from McDonalds for lunch, and several thick fruit juice drinks throughout the day. By the time we would come to the time to break the fast together that night I was hungry but mostly feeling fine and couldn’t understand why others seemed to struggle physically so much with fasting.

Of course, I did not really understand the heart of fasting at all. I greatly enjoyed telling others that I couldn’t eat that day because I was fasting (If Facebook had existed back then I surely would have been posting regular updates of how hungry I was). My heart really wasn’t in glorifying God at all but in simply going through with the obligation because everyone else was. And then there’s the whole chocolate shake thing. I’m pretty sure that didn’t exactly capture the heart behind biblical fasting.

Jesus has already talked to his people about the Kingdom heart towards the poor and prayer and now he turns to a third area of fasting. Once again the point of fasting, like prayer and giving to the poor, is not about garnering attention and looking important but it is about us and God. Others may see what we are doing but if we do it to be seen by them then we miss the heart of fasting altogether.

- Read Isaiah 58:1-5
- For what purpose was Israel apparently fasting according to verses 2 and 3?
- What is God’s complaint with their fasting? Does it have to do with their process of fasting itself or with their heart behind it?
- Is fasting supposed to be just about us humbling ourselves and learning spiritual hunger?
Some of us need to ask ourselves, though, if we even fast with that heart or if we do it simply out of obligation without really understanding it all.

Read Isaiah 58:6-14

What kind of fasting does God says he wants?

Why do you think that God wanted fasting to include such attention being paid to seeking justice and helping the poor?

In the early church (1st, 2nd, and 3rd centuries) fasting was done primarily to recognize the absence of Christ from among his people (Luke 5:35); to seek guidance from God (based on Mark 9:29, they felt that fasting made prayer more effective); to recognize that we live in a world of lack where God’s people will sacrifice for those in need; and as an expression of longing for the resurrection.

There were two main ways that the early church practiced fasting. One was that they regularly fasted once or twice a week as a body for the above reasons. They would then take the food or money that they would have spent on food and collect it and give it to the poor so that they could eat. The other practice was that they usually encouraged fasting before baptism by both the person being baptized and those close to them, ending the fast after the baptism.

The point there is to learn about the early church’s heart behind fasting and not legalistically feel that we must necessarily do what they did. We do need to examine ourselves when it comes to fasting, though. in Matthew 6, Jesus assumed that his people would fast. We need to examine our hearts behind fasting. Why do we do it and is it the kind of fasting that God desires for his people.

**Time to Ponder**

- Read and meditate on Mark 9:29 today.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
Matthew 6:19-21

19 “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

In ninth grade we had a stock market project where we were given class funny money to research and invest in any stock. The one who invested the best would win a prize. I researched carefully and decided upon a company named NYNEX, a telecommunications company in New York. After investing all of my money in that company, I spent months watching their every move. I read every article that I could find and watched the market daily. I had invested everything I had in them and my heart certainly followed. In the end, I wound up winning because the stock I had chosen went way up during that time.

We might have expected Jesus here to say the opposite of what he did: that where your heart is, there your treasure is. And while that would also be true, his statement is even more biting and correct. What we value, what we treasure, where we invest our time, energy, and wealth, that is where our hearts are sure to follow. Because of that, we must make sure that we have treasured the right things.

First, we must make sure that we are not investing in selfish treasure. In the ancient world that took the form of valuable clothing and cloths which moths and vermin might destroy and precious metals that thieves might steal. If Jesus were speaking today surely he would include houses, cars, electronics, and excessive retirement plans that have no consideration on the Kingdom of God.

- Read Proverbs 6:6-10; 2 Corinthians 12:14
  - Jesus was not banning wise planning and modest saving but was addressing selfishly relying upon and treasuring the things of the world which could include planning and saving if we’re not careful.
- Read 1 Timothy 6:6-10
  - What are the dangers of valuing wealth?
  - What earthly goods, possession, or even values (like comfort, security, and happiness) do you struggle with valuing?
- Read James 5:1-5
  - What is the problem with hoarding wealth while others fail to have enough?
  - This is precisely why Kingdom people are to look different
  - We are to create a community where everyone is taken care of and there is no sense of personal excess or lack (see Acts 2:42-47)
Certainly storing up treasures on earth has a strong pull, a much stronger pull than we often realize. As Americans, most of us have little concept of how much we have and how easy it is for us to start storing up treasures on earth. It is so easy to value and rely on a certain standard of living rather than God.

That is why Jesus said that we must flip things around and ensure that we are investing in heavenly treasure. In other words, we must value doing God’s will and living as a Kingdom person, which will put us at odds with the world and the things that the world treasures. It is impossible to say that “this is exactly how much money, possessions, etc., that a Kingdom person should have,” but we can say that the lives, values, and treasure of Kingdom people should look radically different from the world around us.

- Read Luke 12:15
  - Do you know anyone whose life basically does consist in the abundance of their possessions?
  - Is this a struggle for you?
  - Could you lose all of your possessions tomorrow and still be content with your relationship with God and his people?

- Read Psalm 112:5
  - Why does God want his people to be generous and seek justice wherever they can?
  - How can you live out these values in your own life?

- Read Luke 18:29-30
  - This comes on the heels of the story of the rich young man who walked away from the Kingdom of God because he could not treasure the idea of being part of a people who would give up their own excess and wealth to help with the lack of others
  - Jesus says that we might lose earthly treasure in grabbing hold of the Kingdom but if we are truly investing in heavenly treasure then the reward of God’s family will far outweigh anything else
  - Do you truly believe that and live that way?

- Read Matthew 13:44-46
  - What was given up in order to embrace the treasure of the Kingdom in these two accounts?
  - Have you truly given up everything in your heart when it comes to treasures on earth? (That doesn’t mean that you won’t have anything but that you don’t value it and cling to it)
  - Have you continued to live daily as someone who has given up everything or have you slowly started to let that love for earthly treasure creep back into your heart?

**Time to Ponder**

- Read and meditate on 1 John 2:15-17 today.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
One or the Other - Day 23

Matthew 6:22-24

22 “The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. 23 But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!
24 “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

There are just some things in life that you can’t do part-way. You can’t be kind of pregnant. You cannot be sort of married. And, of course, it is impossible to be somewhat dead. You either are those things or you are not. You can’t both be one of them and the opposite at the same time anymore than you can travel both East and West at the exact same time it’s simply impossible.

That is the simple truth behind Jesus’ principle that his people must have their hearts set in the right direction. We must examine ourselves deeply. On What do we have our hearts set? That is a key question, because we will pursue deeply whatever our hearts are set on. When we just can’t seem to be consistent and serve God in the way that we might desire, Jesus reminds us that the problem is probably that our hearts are treasuring the wrong thing.

➢ Read Psalm 119:10, 18, 36, 37
➢ Do you see how “eye” and “heart” are virtually interchangeable here?
➢ How does this connection help us understand Matthew 6:22-23?
➢ If the eye is to the body as the heart is to your life, then what is Jesus’ point?
➢ What are some things that disciples can appropriately have their hearts set on?
➢ What are some things that disciples can inappropriately have their hearts on?
➢ Read Romans 8:5-8
➢ Paul says that what we have our minds set on will determine what we pursue in life
➢ If our minds aren’t set on the things of the Spirit we will never be able to please God.
➢ For instance, if our minds are set on being happy or comfortable why will we find it impossible to truly please God?
➢ Really dig into your heart and be honest, what are the things that your heart and mind are set on at a foundational level? Ask others if they think that your mind is set on the things that you think it is set on.
Jesus was clear that if we are set on serving God, it will throw light on everything in our lives. If we are fiercely set on serving ourselves, it will throw darkness on everything in our lives. Oftentimes what we want to do with our lives is out of sync with what we have our hearts set on because we haven’t taken the time and put in the effort to think about pleasing God and doing his will. We have to often ask ourselves if doing God’s will has really supplanted the desires to be happy, secure, and comfortable in our own lives. It takes a lot of introspection and hard work but unless we truly set our hearts on the things of the Spirit we will continue to try to please two masters... and we will fail.

The other master that Jesus refers to is often translated “money,” but the term that he used, “mammon,” is much more comprehensive than that. It refers to all wealth and possessions, and was often used to refer to ease and prosperity in general. We cannot have both the world’s version of mammon and God. We see people try rather often, though. They worship God on Sunday, serve mammon from Monday through Friday with a brief return to worship on Wednesday night, and then keep Saturday set aside for themselves.

- Do you see any of yourself in that last sentence?
- Are there times in your life when you have tried to serve two masters?
- What does Jesus say is the result of trying that?
- Read Hebrews 12:1-2
  - What does it look like in your life to keep your eyes firmly fixed on Jesus?
  - Have you continued to live daily as someone who has given up everything or have you slowly started to let that love for earthly treasure creep back into your heart?

**Time to Ponder**

- Read and meditate on Mark 12:30 today.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
Matthew 6:25-32
25 “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? 27 Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? 28 “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. 29 Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. 30 If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? 31 So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ 32 For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.

Over on the shelf in my basement sits a nearly three-foot long, fully functioning, bright red toy fire truck. It is made of sturdy metal and I’ve had it for nearly my whole life. I think I was about 4 or 5 when I first got it and I loved that truck and played with it constantly. But I also worried about it all the time. I didn’t like others to play with it and when they did I was constantly stressed that they would break it. It was my treasure. Now, I still have that truck but it is not my treasure. Kids come and play with it and beat it up all the time. It’s now scratched and dinged, and some of the ladders have broken but it doesn’t bother me. I don’t worry about it because it is no longer my treasure.

This chapter culminates in the great command to “seek first the Kingdom of God” (which we will consider tomorrow). Before that, though, Jesus delves into the three primary false gods that keep us from doing just that. The first is the love of human honor (6:1-18), the second is worldly wealth (6:19-24), and the third is the desire for security (6:25-34).

The problem of worry and anxiety flow directly from the previous section. A choice must be made between storing treasure on earth or in heaven; between serving God or mammon. If your treasure is on earth and mammon becomes your God then the result should rightly be worry and anxiety because your treasure is in constant peril of being lost. But if your treasure really is in heaven and God really is your Father then we must trust him and know that our treasure is safe. We need not worry over our true treasure and it becomes silly to worry over things that are not our treasure. Treasure in heaven is in the safest place imaginable.
What are some of the things that you worry about?
Do you see a direct connection between that and what you treasure?
Do you see a direct connection between your worry and your lack of trust in God
  - Worry and anxiety come from a lack of trust in God as Father
  - Jesus doesn’t say that we shouldn’t worry because we don’t care about things but we shouldn’t worry because the Kingdom of God is our treasure and we know that God will provide those other things—we know that God will take care of them.
Read Psalm 103:13-17
  - What does this passage tell us about God’s love?
  - How does this help us in our pursuit of overcoming anxiety?

This is something that we need to take seriously. Worry is not just one of those little bad habits or just a part of being human. Jesus says it is a pagan quality. Those who have God as Father have a different treasure and do not need to worry about things that God has promised to provide. But we must be clear that he hasn’t promised a worry-free life. If you might lose your house, for instance, God has promised provision for your needs but not that house, so why worry? Whether you keep it or not, God is in control of what you need. That is why Jesus offers examples from the creation. Trust doesn’t come from just gritting our teeth and working up faith but from considering how God cares for and provides for his creation. If he feeds and dresses creation, he will provide for us.

Read Matthew 14:25-33
  - What allowed Peter to initially get out of the boat?
  - What happened in verse 30 that caused him to sink?
  - Peter began to treasure his life and give in to worry and fear more than he trusted Jesus?
  - What are areas of your life in which you do that same thing?
  - Do you trust God more than you fear the “winds and waves”?
  - Do you treasure other things in your life more than you do treasure in heaven?
  - How can treasuring things on earth lead to anxiety, worry, and a whole host of other problems?
Read Romans 15:13
  - How does trusting in God bring peace?

Time to Ponder
Read and meditate on Psalm 40:4-5 today.
Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
Vince Lombardi, the legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers, once said that “Winning isn’t everything, it is the only thing.” Of course Lombardi knew that there were things other than winning, but his real point was more like “there is winning first, and then everything else.” That’s how he wanted his players to approach the game of football. If they would do that, they would share in the priorities that he had in his approach to the game. One cannot argue that his philosophy didn’t seem to produce great results, at least in football (I’m not quite sure how healthy that attitude was for the other parts of their lives).

In a sense, Jesus shares the same philosophy when it comes to our lives. There is the Kingdom of God and then there is everything else. Except in this case, when we truly focus on God’s Kingdom, then God promises that everything else will be taken care of by him in his way, and we but need to trust that he knows what he is doing. After all, God knows what is best for us far better than we do (Oh, if we could only get that through our thick skulls).

If we truly desire to seek first the Kingdom then we must know what that means. If we can simplify the definition of the Kingdom to the rule and reign of God in the lives of his people (doing his will on earth as it is done in heaven) then we have a pretty good start at understanding what it means to seek first the Kingdom. But the important thing is to not then go out and define for ourselves what that means. We need to carefully pore over Jesus’ words here in the Sermon on the Mount as he has told us what it means and what it looks like to seek the Kingdom first. Chapters 5 and 6 describe for us what a heart looks like that is seeking first the Kingdom, while chapter 7 will go on and describe warnings for those that want to and warnings for those that want to act like they are but not really do it.

Today we are going to go back through the Sermon on the Mount and look for what Jesus has already told us about putting the Kingdom first.

- Review back through the beatitudes
- Write each of them out as a principle to be applied in life that will help you understand how to seek the Kingdom first
- Review Matthew 5:13-16
- What principle(s) of seeking first the Kingdom do we find here?
Review Matthew 5:20 (remember that he is speaking of a righteousness that extends to the heart and transforms us rather than one that simply conforms our external behavior)
➢ What principle(s) of seeking first the Kingdom do we find here?
➢ Review Matthew 5:21-26
➢ What principle(s) of seeking first the Kingdom do we find here?
➢ Review Matthew 5:27-30
➢ What principle(s) of seeking first the Kingdom do we find here?
➢ Review Matthew 5:31-32
➢ What principle(s) of seeking first the Kingdom do we find here?
➢ Review Matthew 5:33-37
➢ What principle(s) of seeking first the Kingdom do we find here?
➢ Review Matthew 5:38-42
➢ What principle(s) of seeking first the Kingdom do we find here?
➢ Review Matthew 5:43-48
➢ What principle(s) of seeking first the Kingdom do we find here?
➢ Review Matthew 6:1-4
➢ What principle(s) of seeking first the Kingdom do we find here?
➢ Review Matthew 6:5-15
➢ What principle(s) of seeking first the Kingdom do we find here?
➢ Review Matthew 6:16-18
➢ What principle(s) of seeking first the Kingdom do we find here?
➢ Review Matthew 6:19-24
➢ What principle(s) of seeking first the Kingdom do we find here?
➢ Review Matthew 6:25-34
➢ What principle(s) of seeking first the Kingdom do we find here?

Time to Ponder
➢ Read and meditate on Matthew 6:33 today.
➢ Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
➢ Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
There is a Judge - Day 26

Matthew 7:1-6
1 “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. 2 For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.
3 “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? 4 How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? 5 You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.
6 “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.

If there was a hall of fame for biblical passages taken out of context, I’m sure verse one would be in it. “Do not judge” is constantly cited by a culture that believes that we should impose no standards of any kind on others. “Live and let live,” and “only God can judge me,” have become favorite sayings in our world. In fact, this passage has become a force field for those that don’t wish to follow Jesus’ teachings to protect themselves from any kind of judgment or correction at all.

The first thing on which we need to be clear is what Jesus is saying. He is calling on his people to not be constantly judgmental and critical. When we seek after righteousness and holiness it becomes easy to get haughty about other’s lack of righteousness. He is saying that, like our standard of forgiveness, if we don’t offer God’s grace to others, then we should not expect it ourselves. He is saying that we have a tendency to see other’s sin as big and ours as little and we need to flip that around. And he is saying that we can’t force righteousness on others.

But we also need to be clear on what he is not saying. Verse 6 alone makes clear that there will be judgment, discernment, and distinction that must take place on the part of Kingdom people. The key is to know who or what the judge is and how we are to apply that standard.

➢ Read John 12:48 and Hebrews 4:12
➢ What is our judge according to these passages?
➢ Who will one day be judged according to this standard?
➢ It is important for us to understand that we are not the judge of others but we are to apply God’s word as the ultimate judge of right and wrong.
➢ Although the Word is our standard, verse 6 seems to indicate that we cannot force that standard on those who want no part of it
   ➢ What does this mean practically?
Does that mean that whatever people want to do should be okay with us?
How do we balance the concepts of God’s Word being the judge, our call to share it with others, and the realization that we cannot force those standards on those who reject it?

As difficult as it can be to wrestle with the concepts of discernment, judging others and applying God’s Word correctly, the problem of judging within the body of Christ, our brothers and sisters, can be even more problematic. Jesus makes quite clear in a very visually memorable way that we have a tendency to see the sin of others quite clearly while not being so accurate about our own.

- Read 2 Corinthians 13:5
  - We must first be willing to examine ourselves according to God’s word
  - How does returning to the principle of the first beatitude help us here?
  - When you examine yourself with God’s word, what do you see?

- Read Matthew 18:15-17
  - Jesus never forbids us from pointing out the sawdust in the eye of another, but wants his people to be humble and not like the Pharisees who blamed the problems of Israel on the sin of others, but discounted their own sin
  - Kingdom people are to examine themselves, but applying the standard of God’s Word to one another is vital because of the very truth that we cannot see our own sin in proper perspective
  - If we are all seeking humility, dealing with our sin, and lovingly helping our brothers and sisters with their sin, then we will be a well-functioning community
  - Do you have a tendency to give yourself a pass but to be constantly aware of and bothered by the sin of others?
  - Are you open and approachable about your own sin?
  - Are you willing to lovingly help others with their sin after first being willing to deal with yours?

**Time to Ponder**
- Read and meditate on 1 John 1:8-10 today.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
Matthew 7:7-12

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

“Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

One of the popular teachings that are making rounds in the religious Christian world today is that Jesus has faith in people. He wants us to know, as he wanted his disciples to know, how special they are and that he puts a great deal of faith and trust in us. After all, says this line of thinking, Jesus put his faith in the first disciples and they turned the world around.

The problem with that line of thinking is that it might sound good but is untrue biblically. Jesus repeatedly told his disciples that they would fail in their faithfulness to him and they did. Then even after the resurrection he told them to stay in Jerusalem and wait until the Spirit came upon them. When the Spirit did come, it was only then that they turned the world upside down. Jesus had faith in the Spirit, not in human beings by themselves.

This is vitally important to understand as we come to this passage. Up to this point, the Sermon on the Mount has been incredibly challenging. The temptation might be to throw in the towel and feel like we could never live like this. Jesus said to seek first the Kingdom, yes, but it seems so hard that we just want to quit or not even start trying. This is where we must return to the first beatitude and remain poor in Spirit. We cannot live this life on our own and Jesus doesn’t expect us to. God expects us to ask him for help and when we do, he will give us everything we need because he is our Father and he loves us.

Read Luke 11:5-13

What or, more correctly, who does Jesus say will be given in response to are continuing to ask, seek, and knock.

Why would God give us the Holy Spirit in response to us asking for help and seeking the Kingdom life?

Living the Kingdom life is certainly challenging, but God will not mock us. If we really seek after it with all of our heart, he will answer those prayers.

Read John 14:13-14
How is the phrase “in my name” vitally important when we consider that it means “in a manner consistent with”?

Read Luke 13:24

- What does Jesus say will be the result of the one who merely “tries” to enter and live the Kingdom life?
- What is the result of the one who “makes every effort”?
- In what areas of Kingdom living do you feel that you might only “try” sometimes and need to really ask God for help?
- In what areas of Kingdom living are you truly making “every effort”?
- Are you more eager, consistent, and committed to praying for things that you might want than you are for God to help you grow in Kingdom living and seeking first the Kingdom?

Read James 1:5

- What will be God’s response if we earnestly pray and ask for Kingdom-minded things?
- Is there any specific timing mentioned in any of these passages or is the encouragement to “keep asking”?
- What do you need to ask God for today?

God is our Father and he is not resistant to us. He wants to give us good gifts. He wants us to grow in the life of Christ but he also knows that sometimes the process of having to pray and strive for something for an extended period is good for us and part of the process through which he answers our prayers. If we continue to ask, seek, and knock and do not grow weary, he will provide us with everything we need to live the Kingdom life to which he has called us.

But before we end, we need to take note of one more important warning from Jesus. Just as we must forgive and show mercy to others because doing so demonstrates our understanding that God has forgiven and shown mercy to us, so we must be people that seek to do good to others. God is constantly treating us in our best interest and we should do that for others. So how do we do that? The simplest way is to recognize God’s goodness to us by seeking to do for others what we would have them do for us.

**Time to Ponder**

- Read and meditate on 1 John 5:14 today.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
A few years ago some dear friends were going to take us on a hike far back into the South African terrain to see an incredible waterfall. You could reach the waterfall by driving and most people went that way. It was far easier. As we left out on the hike, we were limited in the things that we could take with us because it was an extremely challenging hike over boulders, crevices, and other obstacles. It was a much harder road and demanded much of us but we experienced things along the way that we could never have done had we taken the normal road.

This is much the same picture that Jesus gives of the Kingdom life to which he is calling us all. He wants us to choose to follow him but he will not mislead us into thinking that it is easy. Few take this road. It is much more difficult and demanding. After all, the broad road is like default mode. We can do whatever suits our fancy on that road and that is appealing. The narrow road demands that we humble ourselves and strip down of all the unnecessary items, namely our own will, and learn to live by the character of God. Not many people are willing to do that because of the constant struggle and the great humility and trust that the narrow road demands. Jesus is clear that it is the only road that leads to life but he is equally clear that it is so demanding that few will take up the challenge. The sad part is that if we simply humble ourselves and go down that road, he will be there the whole way to make sure that we don’t fail.

- Read Deuteronomy 30:11-16
  - God’s way has always been difficult but never impossible, if we just trust and rely on him
  - If we think of the beatitudes as perhaps being the narrow gate (or entering into the life of Christ itself) and living out the Kingdom life as the narrow road, what is most difficult for you about going through the narrow gate and walking down the narrow road?

- Read Joshua 24:15
  - What is important about knowing that God always gives us a choice in following him or not?
  - In Matthew 7 Jesus is speaking about those that claim to follow him. He says more will go down the false wide road of claiming to follow him than the narrow road that he has truly cut. Why is it important to know that this is true?
  - Are you ever tempted to widen or narrow the road of the Kingdom life? What are some examples of doing one or the other?
Perhaps the most demanding thing about the narrow gate and the narrow road is that even after we have shed so much to go through the narrow gate, we must constantly be on guard against slipping back onto the wide road. The wide road is the normal road. Even though it claims to be following Jesus it looks pretty much like the way the rest of the world lives at its core. The shaping influence of the world around is incredibly powerful. It is a constant choice that must be made to reject that path and continue on the narrow path of genuine Kingdom living.

- Read Romans 12:1-2
  - Why do you think that we are called to be living (in the sense of ongoing) sacrifices?
  - In what ways does the world “conform” us?
  - What must we do, according to this passage, to be transformed?
  - What are some of the most challenging areas in which you must constantly train your thinking to align with Christ and not snap back into conformity with the world?

- Read Psalm 1:1-6
  - What are the various outcomes and/or characteristics mentioned in this passage for the one who walks the way of the Lord?
  - What are the outcomes for those that don’t?
  - How does this passage help to motivate you to choose or stay on the narrow path?

**Time to Ponder**
- Read and meditate on Romans 2:7-8 today.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
Matthew 7:15-23
15 “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. 16 By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17 Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.
21 “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ 23 Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’

We were in South Africa a couple of years ago immediately following the Soccer World Cup that was held there. I quickly discovered that I looked very much like a national hero player for the South African team, Matthew Booth. To make matters even crazier, he has a black wife and two sons, which I also have. So everywhere we went in the entire country we were followed, asked for autographs and pictures, “Booooth” was chanted, and we were even nearly mobbed a couple of times. The problem was that I was not Booth even though everyone thought that. Had I started to believe it myself and show up at a game, thinking I could play, however, I would have had a rude awakening.

We can fool people into thinking we are something when we are not but we cannot fool God. Jesus’ point here is simple. Many people will claim to be Kingdom people. In fact the previous section made clear that more people would claim that than those that genuinely are. Here he answers “how” and “why” that happens, and what the end result will be. It doesn’t matter if we do all kinds of great Kingdom looking things, and are even sincere, if we are not doing God’s will, then he will not know us when we show up and expect to be let in.

- Read 2 Timothy 4:1-4
  - Does the biggest danger to God’s people come from “outside” the body or from those that at least seem “inside”?
  - How does Matthew 7 tell us we can recognize false teachers?
  - Why, according to 2 Timothy 4:3, do people get taken in by false teachings and false gospels?
  - What will happen to those that accept false teaching?
  - What do you currently do to be careful and ensure that you do not unintentionally embrace false teaching?
We must always check our own hearts and ensure that we are truly committed to obedience, submission, and carrying the cross of true discipleship. The Bible does warn that some that are naive or easily fooled will be bamboozled by false teachers, but the far more dangerous aspect is that our hearts drift from wanting to walk the narrow way and we then gravitate towards those that will soothe our ears and tell us that we are still on the narrow path when we are not.

What can be discouraging for those that are genuinely trying to walk the narrow road is to look around and see so many more people on the broad road. We can easily begin to question if we are wrong. How can so many people that sound so sincere and godly, and are doing so many wonderful things be wrong? Who are we to think that we are right? But this is not about us, it is about obedience to God’s will. Spiritual talk and even actions are no substitute for humility and submission to God’s entire will. What should be encouraging about Matthew 7 is that Jesus promised us that more folks would claim him but not really be of his Kingdom people. So when we look around and see so many people that claim Christianity and do some Christian things, but whose life and doctrine don’t seem to match with God’s word and his will (this is not a case of us judging them but in holding to the standard of God’s word as the judge and discerning that truth), we should be reminded that Jesus said it would be this way. That doesn’t mean that we get arrogant and write them off (or even that we assume that everyone else must is lost). It means we should be motivated all the more to examine ourselves and help others to do so, and to love them and show them the truth of the Scriptures if they are not truly on that narrow road.

- Read 2 Corinthians 13:5
  - Why do you think Paul called for self-examination?
  - How do you examine yourself? How often do you do it?
- Read 2 Timothy 2:14-26
  - What are the principles given in this passage for remaining faithful to the true gospel and avoiding false teaching?

**Time to Ponder**

- Read and meditate on John 10:1-6 today.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.
Matthew 7:24-29
24 “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. 25 The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.
26 But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. 27 The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”
28 When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, 29 because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

Not long ago I was in a retail store and I was in the vicinity of a woman that was trying on jackets. She had two jackets that looked to me to be the same jacket except that they were different colors. She was agonizing over which one to choose and evidently could not make a decision. So she finally declared to her husband that she would avoid making a decision and just take both jackets. I’m guessing that he wasn’t as excited about that decision as she seemed to be but we live in a time where most people don’t really like to have to make hard decisions. They defer them and try to avoid them altogether if they can.

What works for jackets, though, does not work when it comes to the Kingdom life. Jesus ends his soaring sermon with a sober reality. There are two paths in life and it is up to each person to choose. Decisions must be made. The challenging aspect of the decision to live a Kingdom life, however, and to trust in the Lord is that it is a decision that must be affirmed constantly. It’s not a one-time decision that you never have to re-visit again. It is a constant way of a life that must be maintained. Will we live upon the sand of the world’s way or the rock and refuge of the Kingdom life found in Christ?

Read James 1:22-25
- Are there any areas of your Christian life where you know that you tend to hear the word but not really do what it says?
- What is the result of doing that?
- How can you experience victory and growth in those areas that are tough for you to remain in obedience to God’s word?

Read Psalms 27:5; 31:2-3; 42:9; 62:1-7; 78:35; 92:15; 94:22
- Is God really your refuge and the rock upon which you build your life?
- Is every attitude of your heart and every emotion built upon the rock of God’s word?
- What is the result when we build our foundation upon the wisdom of the world and things other than God and his will?
At the end of this great sermon, Matthew tells us that the crowds were amazed because Jesus taught as one who seemed to have such great authority. He seemed to be directly speaking the will and words of God rather than constantly quoting other rabbis and sources of authorities, as was the common practice among spiritual teachers of his day. The crowds sensed that Jesus was enacting something entirely new, a completely new way of approaching God and living for him, and he seemed to have the authority to do it.

- Read Matthew 28:18-20
- Why do you think that Matthew confirmed at the end of his gospel that indeed Jesus did have all authority?
- What are the implications for his teaching, like those in the Sermon on the Mount, if he really does have all authority?
- Have you truly given Jesus all authority in every area of your life?
- If you said “yes,” would Jesus agree with that assessment?

**Time to Ponder**
- Read and meditate on Philippians 1:21 today.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.