

Daily God Walk

Life of Christ Series

Sermon on

the

Mount - 1

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All Scripture quotations are taken from the New International
Version (NIV). All other translations used will be credited using
these abbreviations:

(KJV) – King James Version
(NKJV) – New King James Version
(TLB) – The Living Bible
(TM) – The Message

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Day One

Jesus: Teaching, Preaching, Healing

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness among the people. Large crowds... followed him. - Matthew 4:22-23

The fourth chapter of Matthew begins with Jesus going into the desert for a 40 day fast and consecration in preparation for the ministry he was about to enter into. At the end of that period he was severely tempted of the devil and came through victorious. Now he was ready to begin his ministry of teaching and preaching the kingdom of God.

I don't think that even the devil realized the significance of the message of the kingdom that Jesus was to introduce to the world, and certainly, the Jewish leaders missed the point. The message of the kingdom is simply a message of new birth. It is a message of being born again on the inside; a change of heart.

When one is born into the kingdom of God through a birth of the Spirit, all things are different. The curses of the fall begin to be removed and the things that were lost begin to be restored. Among those things to be restored is physical health as well as mental health.

Far too many Christians today have made the same error as the religious leaders of Jesus day. Many today have made becoming a Christian a matter of reciting certain doctrines and participating in certain rituals. Once one has done those things, and accepted in faith

their salvation, they are then confirmed "Christian."

While doctrine, and even ritual, are important components of our faith and worship, they are not what initiates one into the kingdom of God. It is the born again experience in which the very spirit of a person is born of the Spirit of God and that person becomes a new creation.

When one has been born again then he can understand the principles of the kingdom and gain access to all the blessings of the kingdom. Jesus taught, preached and healed and that should be a pattern for spiritual leaders today. In fact, that should be the norm for all believers. Talk the kingdom and expect confirming power.

Prayer: Lord, give me the desire to teach others and the faith to release your power to demonstrate your truth. In Jesus name, amen.

Message: Jesus came teaching and preaching the kingdom of God. The message of the kingdom is simply a message of new birth. It is a message of being born again on the inside; a complete change of heart.

Affirmation: I have been born again - born of the Spirit. Therefore, I am anointed to preach and teach the kingdom of God to others.

Reflection: The religious leaders view of God was skewed by 1000 years of tradition and they couldn't hear the truth of what Jesus was teaching. Their emphasis was doctrine, ritual and tradition. Are things different today?

Day Two

The Crowds Followed Him to the Mountain

Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.

- Matthew 5:1-2

When Jesus spoke, people listened. The message he preached appealed to the people and inspired hope in them. Also, when he spoke he had a different air about him than the teachers they were accustomed to hearing. People would say things like, "He speaks with such authority," and, "I never heard anyone teach like that." Jesus never had a problem relating to the common people.

He did not relate well to the Jewish leaders. The religious leaders didn't like him because they saw him as a threat to the theology they had so carefully constructed over centuries of developing traditions. So much of what he taught challenged them to step outside their normal way of thinking, and they weren't accustomed to thinking outside the box tradition had placed them in.

But the common people were different. They were hungry to hear anything that would give them hope. One of the things we need to remember about that day was that the common people didn't read. There was no need for them to because books were all hand written and rare. Only the learned religious leaders among them could read and the people were at their mercy to understand God's law.

Jesus had a different way of teaching. He would take a simple truth of the kingdom and teach it in a parable using a concept the farmer, the housewife, the husband and others could easily understand. Unlike the typical religious teacher Jesus didn't teach as if the traditions were chiseled in stone. He made the truth real and people followed him to hear what he said.

It is easier for us today because we have access to more books than we will ever be able to read. Yet, the message is still simple. Jesus explains that if we are to be in the kingdom of God then we must go beyond doctrine and tradition and allow the Holy Spirit to do his work in us. Kingdom life is easy when we live it with Holy Spirit power.

Prayer: Grant me the grace hear, believe and to continue in the simplicity of kingdom truth. In Jesus name, amen.

Message: Jesus didn't teach as if the traditions were chiseled in stone. He made the truth real and people followed him to the mountain to hear what he had to say.

Affirmation: I have followed Jesus to the mountain and He has given me Holy Spirit to guide me and grace to humbly follow him.

Reflection: Give some thought to why the teachings of Jesus were easy for the common people to embrace. Are parables an effective strategy to reach people today?

Day Three

The Blessed Poor

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. - Matthew 5:3

In every society the poor get the short end of everything. They have to work harder, often for tyrannical bosses, and often get paid far below their value. It was particularly true in the day of Jesus, before industrialization, when most people lived off of the land.

Jesus begins this well known message by addressing the plight of the poor. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." In blessing them he recognizes their need and promises to be an answer. 700 years before he came Isaiah gave the prophecy that Jesus would read on the day he began his public ministry in Nazareth. That prophecy began, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor" (Isaiah 61, Luke 4).

It was the poor and needy that most often came to hear the message of hope that he preached. It is the same today. Those who have the greatest need are the ones most easily reached by the kingdom message.

Job said, "Life is short and filled with sorrow," and there is no group of people who realize the truth of that statement more than the poor. No other group of people tug at the heartstrings of God more than these who have no hope in this world. Then Jesus offers hope; "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

The poor in the time of Christ were well schooled in being servants. They knew well who was their master and what they needed to do to please him. Jesus is addressing this attitude of servanthood in this passage.

If we are to fully realize the benefits of the kingdom of God we are going to have to learn the attitude of the poor and serve the Lord of the kingdom well. We who have known many blessings must remember to humbly adopt the attitude of the poor in spirit.

Prayer: In a time of blessing, when I haven't been hungry, cold, or sick, help me to still have the attitude of the poor in spirit. Amen.

Message: To fully realize the benefits of the kingdom of God we are going to have to learn the attitude of the poor and serve the Lord of the kingdom well. We must remember to humbly adopt the attitude of the poor in spirit.

Affirmation: I am a servant in the kingdom of God and God, who is my Lord, has given me grace to serve him well.

Reflection: It would be good to explore the concept of what it means to be "poor in spirit." It is noted that the poor and needy flocked to Jesus, while the educated and religious leaders remained skeptical. Why do you think that was?

Day Four

The Blessed Mourners

Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted. - Matthew 5:4

Times were very difficult for the common person in the days of Jesus. They were under the oppression of a foreign government; they were abused by their religious leaders; and most of them lived in abject poverty. They had much about which to be in mourning.

Their spiritual fate rested in the hands of those who would sell them inferior sacrifices for profit and require tithe of even the herbs in their garden. They were taught, "Obey the law, make sacrifice, and you will be righteous." They truly tried, but they never measured up.

The attitude of the common man was portrayed when Jesus pointed out two men praying in the temple. One, a Pharisee, was thanking God that he wasn't like the publican, the common name for sinner. The other, a publican, was crying out for mercy, knowing he was a sinner.

Political oppression and religious bigotry had left the average citizen of Judea feeling very sad, frustrated and helpless. They came mourning to the God of their fathers and Jesus came with a blessing upon those who mourned; they would be comforted.

Jesus read their heart, saw their frustration and gave them hope. The world needs hope today. They need someone with the anointing of God to bring good news to do just that;

bring them good news. They need to see the Christ of Restoration living through us.

One night I had a dream. In the dream I saw a crowd of people behind a fence. There were old and young, male and female among them. They had their hand outstretched and they were saying, "We just need a leader." They were like the people of Jesus' day; frustrated, helpless, and desperately hoping to find someone to comfort them in their need.

You and I have the message of hope for those who mourn. Jesus promised to comfort those who are in distress over this life.

Prayer: Lord, I thank you that you have turned my sorrow into joy. I ask you to make me a vessel of hope to those who still mourn. Amen.

Message: The people of Judea came mourning to the God of their fathers and Jesus came with a blessing upon those who mourned; they would be comforted.

Affirmation: In every circumstance of life I can go to Jesus and he will understand. In difficult times he will be my comfort.

Reflection: The devotion states, "Political oppression and religious bigotry had left the average citizen of Judea feeling very sad, frustrated and helpless." What were the circumstances which left the people feeling "Harassed, helpless, and like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36)?

Day Five

The Blessed Meek

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. - Matthew 5:5

In these first three blessings of what has been called the Beatitudes, Jesus clearly identifies the people of his time. They were poor, in mourning over their circumstances, and were meekly submissive to their leaders, both political and religious.

These were people who knew suffering. Their dire circumstances had driven them to lowering their eyes and not argue or talk back to their oppressors because they wanted to feed their family. They would submit themselves to whatever indignity was necessary to see that their family was cared for.

Jesus was addressing one of the greatest needs of the people; validation. They needed to be told that they had value in the kingdom of heaven. He addressed their poverty promising that theirs was the kingdom; he addressed their sorrow promising that they would be comforted; he addressed their humiliation by declaring that they would inherit the earth. Is it any wonder that the crowds followed him?

The message that Jesus was bringing could be summed up in one four letter word; hope. It seems that his purpose in this introduction to the "Magna Charta of the Christian Faith" was to give hope to those who followed him.

Regardless of our circumstances, whether in poverty or in despair; whether in joy or sorrow;

whether in strength or weakness: there is hope in Jesus, the Christ of Redemption.

Jesus is helping us to see that it is not our place to demand to be understood, or accepted, but it is our place to submit our pleas to him who is the justifier of all who come to him. Jesus is telling us to continue in meekness, even tolerating abuse by others, because his reward is eternal.

Our hope is in the promise of God to validate us with his blessing and not to vilify those who have mistreated us. If God has given us value, then what does it matter what the rest of the world does?

Prayer: Lord, as others in the faith, I have endured much in this life. Grant me the peace of understanding the hope you offer and help to accept your valuation of me. Amen.

Message: The message that Jesus was bringing could be summed up in one four letter word; hope. It seems that his purpose in this message was to give hope to those who followed him.

Affirmation: I heard the message and believed it. When I believed it I acted on it by faith and it was my faith-action which secured for me the hope which has become my anchor.

Reflection: In this blessing Jesus is helping us to see that it is not our place to demand to be understood, or accepted, but it is our place to submit our pleas to he who is the justifier of all who come to him. Give thought to how meekness and humility are actually strengths.

Day Six

Blessed Are Those Who Are Hungry For God

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

- Matthew 5:6

There is a difference between desiring to have the favor of God and desiring God himself. There are many who desire God's favor, but there are not nearly as many who desire God.

We certainly believe in the grace of God and in fact, if it was not for his grace all of us would be doomed. But, there are far too many who seek the grace, or favor, of God only to relieve their anxiety concerning the after-life. They desire God's favor, but they are not hungry for God.

Jesus is addressing people who knew what it was like to be hungry and thirsty. Most of those who followed him were poor and in need of much comfort. They were pursuing him with the hope that something he says will open a door for them and they can find relief.

The door to fulfillment Jesus gives them is God himself; those who hunger and thirst for God will be filled with God.

It has been my blessing to watch the growth of many people as they progress in their journey of faith. I think of Steve, a drug addict who came to God just to get clean of drugs, but didn't have the sufficient motivation to stay free of that addiction. Then something changed in him. Instead of seeking to be free

from drugs he began to seek God and God alone. Today Steve serves God well and is free from drugs.

I remember David who had seen what others were getting when they gave their heart to the Lord and he wanted it too. At first David didn't know it was God he needed, he just wanted the benefits of faith he saw in the lives of others.

Finally he got it; he realized that the only way to get what he wanted was to develop a desire for God that was stronger than anything else. The day David cried out to God from a desperate heart God filled him with grace.

Those who are hungry for God will seek Him, those who seek Him will be filled with God.

Prayer: Lord, may my hunger for you continue to push away the desires of this world. May my hunger for you fill me with righteousness as you fill me with your spirit. In Jesus name.

Message: Those who are hungry for God will seek God and those who seek God will be filled with God.

Affirmation: I am hungry for God; I seek God; God fills me with himself. Now I am becoming more like him.

Reflection: Think about what it means to be hungry for God. How does a person know when he is hungry for God? When a person is hungry for God what is he hungry for?

Day Seven

Blessed Are Those Who Show Mercy

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy. - Matthew 5:7

Since the beginning God has been trying to impress upon mankind that he is merciful. Mercy is the underscore of every command, every deliverance, and yes, every judgment. At least 360 times some form of the word mercy is used in the Bible.

Mercy is simply compassion in action. The mercy of God is evident when in love he grants mercy to those of us deserving only judgment.

One of the best New Testament words for mercy is Grace. Grace simply means favor. Some have coined the phrase, "God's unmerited favor toward us."

Jesus is not speaking of the mercy of God, but rather, he is speaking of what he expects from his followers. Only by God's grace can we who harbor such human feelings as resentment and bitterness be moved with compassion and offer mercy to those who have offended us.

It is interesting that just after he made reference to hungering after God he blesses the merciful. It appears that he is saying once we have been filled with God then mercy becomes second nature to us. The mercy God has shown throughout history becomes the attitude of our own heart as we are filled with his righteousness.

Someone asks, "What happens if we do not show mercy?" The answer is in a parable Jesus told. There was a servant of a wealthy ruler who owed more than he could ever possibly pay. Just as the ruler was about to cast him and his family into the debtors prison the debtor begged for mercy. The generous ruler, realizing the futility of putting the man in prison when he could never repay him, forgave debt.

As he was on his way home to give the good news to his family the forgiven one met a person who owed him the equivalent of one days wages. He threw that man in prison because he could not pay.

When the ruler heard of this callous act he reversed his earlier decision and had the original servant thrown into prison.

Prayer: I tend to want people to receive what they deserve rather than to extend the same grace I have received. Help me to be merciful. Amen.

Message: According to the parable Jesus gave of the ungrateful servant, we must be willing to show mercy ourselves in order to receive God's mercy.

Affirmation: I am grateful for the mercies of God and I show my gratitude by being merciful to others.

Reflection: Have you noticed that God has made many promises then he will say, "If you will... I will... His mercy, love and kindness is available to all and he only asks that we show others the same consideration.

Day Eight

The Pure In Heart Will See God

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

The promise to the pure in heart that they will see God is a two-sided coin. Those who heard him speak were both moved with hope and trepidation. The thought of seeing God, or being with God, inspired great hope, but the question that arose in the hearts of the hearers was, "How can I ever be pure?"

Everyone who heard him struggled with living righteously on a daily basis. They tried discipline, will power and every other means they could and yet their hearts were not pure. How could one ever receive this benefit? How could one be pure enough to be with God?

Jesus was introducing a new world to those who would follow him. He was opening a door to a relationship with God that they had never experienced before. He was giving them hope that they could be pure.

They had seen the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. They had been told just how to live and every letter of the law was spelled out for them. Volumes were written that explained just how many steps could be taken on the Sabbath, and the procedure for taking a brother to court, how to disown family members who didn't live right. And much more.

The people were taught everything except how to have a pure heart. Volumes would not need to be written that defined the law to the

nth degree if their heart was pure; but how did one get a pure heart?

There was only one way to get a pure heart. The old heart had to be replaced with a new heart. Ezekiel wrote, “I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees” (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

Israel had heard the message of Ezekiel, but they couldn't grasp its meaning. Then Jesus introduced the concept of being born again when he was talking to Nicodemus. When a person commits his life to following Christ he is given a new heart - a pure heart. And his desire is to follow God.

Prayer: Lord, there are times when my “new” heart needs renewing. Continue to give me a pure heart. In Jesus name, amen.

Message: The only way we can have a pure heart is to be born again and receive a new heart from God himself. He has promised to give us a new heart and a new spirit. Let's take him up on that deal.

Affirmation: My natural heart has been corrupted by the world and my own desires, but I have been born again and given a new heart and a new spirit.

Reflection: Religion demands for us to be good, but God opens the door of goodness through the gift of his Spirit. Reflect on how our own efforts fall short of being pure and how we need his grace to be who he has called us to be.

Day Nine

Blessed Are The Peacemakers

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

How does one become a peacemaker? The starting point is to make peace with God through faith in Christ and receiving personal peace. I have found that I cannot convey peace if I don't have peace myself.

When you look at the life and ministry of Christ you discover that his whole purpose in coming to earth was to establish a kingdom of everlasting peace. Isaiah 9:6 calls him the Prince of Peace and to his disciples Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you" (14:27).

Jesus, the Prince of Peace, has given peace to those who would enter the kingdom. Once we receive his peace we become subjects of his kingdom. As subjects in his kingdom we are given the responsibility to fulfill the purpose of his kingdom. What is the purpose of the kingdom? It is to promote peace.

At his birth the angels proclaimed, "Glory to Go in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14). Those upon whom his "favor," or "grace," rests shall have peace.

There is then a responsibility placed upon those of us who have received peace. We are to be ministers of peace. Paul writing to the church at Corinth instructed them that believers have been reconciled to God, that is; they have peace with God, through Christ. He

goes on to say that we as believers have been given the ministry of reconciliation calling others to be reconciled, or to make peace, with God.

We who are believers in Christ are to be the peacemakers of the world. We are called to peace; we are called to promote peace; we are called to be peacemakers. Observe those around you, your neighborhood, your workplace. Who among those people do not have peace? You and I are their lifeline to the peace of God.

Being a peacemaker means being committed to a principle greater than ourselves. It means serving the Prince of Peace in his kingdom.

Prayer: Lord, I have not always represented the Prince of Peace well. Grant me grace to overcome my prejudices and spread peace. Amen.

Message: The way to be a peacemaker is to have the Prince of Peace within. When we are at peace with God we can be at peace with others and when we are at peace with others we become peacemakers.

Affirmation: I am committed to spreading the peace of God to all who are in my arena of influence.

Reflection: How can we consider ourselves peacemakers when we seek to make peace through violence. Peace can only come when we first find peace in our own hearts. Think about it.

Day Ten

Blessed Are The Persecuted

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

Everyone who has introduced a new idea or concept into an environment that is steeped in tradition has known persecution. Change does not come easily for people, especially when their whole life was based on their traditional understanding and belief system. If they are wrong then their entire life has been for nothing.

Knowing this Jesus was warning his disciples that they would meet opposition from the very people he was sending them to with a message of peace and freedom. Jesus knew that the religious leaders had traditions that they would not easily surrender and that they would use their clout to persecute anyone who tried to change them.

Throughout history those who have introduced truth which opposed tradition have been severely persecuted. Galileo, the father of modern science, was found to be a heretic and arrested. Luther, the father of the reformation was excommunicated. Michael Servetus was burned at the stake atop a stack of his own burning books because he opposed a cardinal doctrine of the church.

Yes, those who would follow Christ would be persecuted because of following truth, but there would be a reward. The kingdom, which

is both of heaven and in earth, was to belong to those who endured rejection, persecution, and even death.

We live in a pluralistic society that strongly rejects the concept of an absolute truth and has concluded that truth is actually only true to the one who believes it, therefore truth has no absolute. Everyone who believes in anything is right. No one can declare any religion to be the right religion and those who do are branded as bigots and hate mongers.

So we who believe that “there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12) and who proclaim that truth must be prepared to be persecuted.

Prayer: Persecution is not a pleasant thought, but grant me the grace to speak of Christ and his kingdom regardless of the consequences. Amen.

Message: When the truth demands change those who preach that truth are bound to be persecuted.

Affirmation: My prayer is that when I am persecuted for preaching the truth that I will stand firm in the faith.

Reflection: There was much bigotry and violation of civil rights in the time of the Apostles, but they never took up the sword of resistance against those evils. Rather, they continued to present the gospel in love. The result? Within a few decades their influence spread around the world.

Day Eleven

Blessed Are The Insulted

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. - Matthew 5:11

Have you ever had someone cast an insulting remark toward you simply because you are a Christian? If you haven't you probably don't get out much. Nearly all of us have had people hurl insults at us for no apparent reason except that we are Christian.

If you don't want to be insulted, then don't become an active believer in Jesus. In fact, if you don't want to be insulted, don't become an active believer in anything because once you take a stand on any issue someone is going to take pot shots at you.

The difference between being insulted for the sake of faith in Jesus and being insulted for any other cause is the blessing. When you are insulted for any other reasons than faith in Christ, there is no benefit; you simply suffer insult. But, when we are insulted for faith in the name of Jesus he takes the suffering and gives us blessing.

The last few days we have been looking at the passage that has been called The Beatitudes. The beatitudes are simply blessed attitudes. Jesus is promising a blessing for those who endure the circumstances of life and who are committed to following him.

To endure with joy the circumstances Jesus calls blessed requires more grace than what is

normal for us humans to have. It requires a super-human quality. It requires us to act in a way that reflects a new character. To be the person Jesus describes in this passage we must be born again and that's all there is to it.

When the circumstances of life overwhelm you, get your eyes off of those circumstances and focus on Jesus. When we look to him and are hungry for his righteousness, he not only fills us with righteousness but he also gives us love, joy and peace because that is what the kingdom of God is.

Are you ready for some blessing? Then be prepared to receive insult.

Prayer: Lord, grant me the grace to endure all that comes my way as I continue to speak of the faith that has set me free. Amen.

Message: When you are insulted for any other reason than faith in Christ, there is no benefit; you simply suffer insult. But, when you are insulted for faith in the name of Jesus he takes the suffering and gives us blessing.

Affirmation: I am willing to suffer insult for the sake of Christ because the blessing far outweighs the insult.

Reflection: Have you noticed how followers of Christ are demeaned and called hate mongers for simply standing for the righteousness of God and against the sins of the day? It is interesting that those who say harsh things about Christians are never accused of hate speech.

Day Twelve

Rejoice You Blessed Ones

Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

- Matthew 5:12

Jesus said, "Rejoice when you are insulted because you have a reward waiting for you." There is no escaping the response the world has to committed believers, but there is a time of eternal blessing waiting for those who will follow him.

The main idea that Jesus seems to be promoting in this passage is we should hold on to our faith regardless of what is happening around us. If we are poor we do not need to rejoice in being poor, but we should rejoice in knowing that even though we are poor God is watching out for us and is blessing us.

If we have suffered loss then we should not be afraid to mourn, but in our mourning we must remember that he is right there with us and he will not withhold his blessing from us.

He addresses the merciful, the meek and the peacemakers. Each of these require a certain grace in the way that we respond to others. He also speaks of being persecuted and insulted for being a person of faith and he addresses the manner in which we should respond to those circumstances as well.

How are we to respond? "Rejoice and be glad" for our hope is not in this world but in the eternal home he has prepared for us.

A story is told of a missionary who had returned home by ship from a life of service in a foreign field. There was a large crowd waiting at the dock to greet the passengers as they left the ship. One by one the passengers were greeted by their friends and loved ones. Finally, the last to leave the ship was the missionary and there was not one person left on the dock to greet him.

The missionary felt very bad and lamented so to the Lord. Then he heard that small voice inside him say, "My son, you're not home yet."

Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven! Look past the challenges of this life to the hope of our heavenly home.

Prayer: Thank you for the hope that is in Jesus our Lord. Grant me the grace to keep my focus on my home and not on this earth. Amen.

Message: Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven! Look past the challenges of this life to the hope of our heavenly home.

Affirmation: I rejoice in knowing that this world is not my home - I am just passing through on my journey home.

Reflection: We are being called to view our passage in this world as just that, a passage. When we become too attached to citizenship in this world we begin to lose sight of our hope for the next world. Which citizenship do you protect the strongest?

Day Thirteen

You Are the Salt of the Earth

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 by men.

- Matthew 5:13

Why did Jesus use the analogy of salt? How are we the salt of the earth? To understand that question we must know a little bit about how salt was used in that time.

We use salt today as a preservative and as an agent to bring out the taste in food. Those are two of the purposes for which salt was used in ancient times, but there were many others. Among the other uses was a ceremonial use in the old covenant. It was used as a fire catalyst and it was also used as a fertilizer according to some accounts.

It seems that in every use of salt it is a catalyst to enhance the use of the thing being salted. Whether it is a preservative, a flavor enhancer, a fire enhancer, a fertilizer, or, as in some cases, an antiseptic to aid in healing, it's use is the same; it is a catalyst to enhance the thing being salted.

It is clear that Jesus is teaching us that we are to be a catalyst for change. We are the salt that draws people to Christ; we are the salt that releases the Holy Spirit upon this world; we are the salt that adds flavor to the world.

Luke records another time Jesus used the analogy of salt. He was calling disciples to commitment when he said, "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out" (14:34-35).

Many believe Luke's passage refers to the practice in ancient times when outdoor ovens had blocks of salt on the bottom. The salt would enhance the fire making it burn better. Over time the salt would use its ability to help the fire and would actually affect the cooking process so it would have to be thrown out because it was no longer of use.

Are you useful to Christ in his kingdom? Are you salt to the world, or salt that has lost its purpose?

Prayer: Lord, I don't want to be salt that has lost its saltiness. Help me to remain ready for your use. In Jesus name, amen.

Message: As salt in the world we are the catalyst which enables people to be born into the kingdom of God. Without the salt, or messenger of the kingdom, no one would be saved.

Affirmation: I am purposed to be an effective catalyst to lead others to be birthed into the kingdom of God.

Reflection: Question Today: "How is your world being changed by you being in it?" Our value to the world salt it to promote the kingdom of God. If we are not doing that then we have no value to the world.

Day Fourteen

You Are the Light of the World

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. 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. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

- Matthew 5:14-16

Have you ever heard someone say, "My religion is a private matter?" What they usually mean is that they really don't want to be bothered by religion. They have it figured out to their own satisfaction and they don't need to talk about it.

I wonder if they make that same application about sports. You know the guy who says, "I like sports, but I don't want to talk about it," or, "Yeah, I have a favorite team, but I never discuss it because it's private." Do you know that person? No? Neither do I because the person who likes sports talks about sports. They talk about their favorite team and chances are they know the stats of the players.

You see, when a person truly believes in something they aren't afraid to talk about it. The things a person is reluctant to talk about are the things they aren't very sure about or don't know much about.

Jesus made the bold statement which is also a mandate; "You are the light of the world." Being a light to shine into the darkness around us is not an option - it is a command. We

produce light because we are light. If the environment in which we have exposure is not well lit it is not because of the environment it is because our light is not shining.

Many are saying, "Well, I have the truth and the truth is enough to draw people." Don't confuse truth with light. Truth is an absolute and light is a condition. If people do not see your light in the truth you present they will not believe your truth.

If you have truly been born again and moved from darkness into the light you have become light. The world around you needs to see the light of hope that you represent.

Prayer: Lord, it is easy for my light to become dimmed by the desires of this world. Grant me the grace to ever shine for you. In Jesus name.

Message: Truth is an absolute and light is a condition. If people do not see your light in the truth you present they will not believe your truth.

Affirmation: I realize the light of the gospel in my world is the life I live and the words I speak. I have purposed to be an effective light to the world around me.

Reflection: Think about this - "If the environment in which we have exposure is not well lit it is not because of the environment it is because our light is not shining." How bright does your light shine in the darkness?

Day Fifteen

Christ is the Fulfillment of the Law

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.

- Matthew 5:17

The people had been struggling under the load of traditions that had been placed on the Law and they were overwhelmed with the enormity of it all. In that day they combined the Law and the traditions into one and no one could live it.

When Jesus came he spoke differently and his message offered hope. They were starting to believe that they could make it. Then he says that he did not come to destroy the Law. What they were hearing initially was what they had been taught, that the Law and the traditions were one. What were they to think now?

Today we know that something about the Law certainly changed because of Christ, but what changed? The Law given to Moses set up a standard by which a person could be judged. The Law itself pointed out the distinction between God and man.

Man made his will clear at the fall and that was to pursue wisdom and fulfillment on his own. God recognized that and gave a pattern of life that would bring the fulfillment man sought. The problem was that man was driven by his soulish nature to fulfill the desires of the flesh. For 1000's of years there was a standoff; God was saying, "You can have it but

you have to obey me,” and man was saying, “I want it, but I want to get it my way.”

Jesus told them that he didn't come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. How did he fulfill the Law? Because the very purpose for which the Law was given was completed in Christ. The purpose of the Law was to lead man to submit his will to God and follow him to fulfillment. Jesus fulfilled the Law and now it is him living out the will of God in us.

The grace of God released upon believers is more than just being reconciled to God, our sins forgiven and given a hope for eternity. The grace of God is the righteousness of God being imputed to us and our hearts being changed to desire the will of God over our own will.

Prayer: Thank you Father for the righteousness of Christ that now abides in me. Amen.

Message: The very purpose for which the Law was given was completed in Christ. The purpose of the Law was to lead man to submit his will to God and follow him to fulfillment. Jesus fulfilled the Law and now it is him living out the will of God in us.

Affirmation: I no longer need the law and traditions to guide me because I have the lawgiver himself living in me.

Reflection: Jesus did not come to change the rules, but rather he came to enable man to obey the rules through his Spirit living within man. If this is true then why are there so many who claim to be followers of Christ who do not obey him?

Day Sixteen

The Purpose of the Law

I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least strike of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

- Matthew 5:18

If it is true that not one small letter or one strike of the pen will be invalid in the law, then how does that reconcile with the previous verse?

Jesus told us that he did not come to do away with the law but to fulfill it. What does it mean to fulfill the law? To know that, we must know the purposes of the law. If we know the purposes of the law then we will know when those purposes are fulfilled and in that way we will know in what sense Christ was the fulfillment of the law.

What was the purpose of the Law? Was it a vehicle to convict, or even condemn mankind? Perhaps it was given as a standard of what God originally intended for mankind?

Paul explains the purpose of the Law in Galatians 3:19-25:

“What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the seed to whom the promise referred had come... the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.... So the law was put in charge to

lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.”

Christ did fulfill the Law by removing the need for the Law. We who have embraced Christ and have been born again have given a pure heart. As we walk in this newness of life we live the righteousness of Christ.

Prayer: Lord, I thank you for revealing your will through the law, and thank you for giving me Christ to be my righteousness. Amen.

Message: The law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law

Affirmation: The law of God is no longer written on tablets of stone but it is written on the tablet of my heart, and it is written in the heart of everyone who is a follower of Christ.

Reflection: Many see a contrast between the law and grace. They feel the law demands obedience and grace excuses disobedience. That is only partially true. A greater truth of grace is not that it excuses our sin, but rather, grace changes our attitude about walking in favor with God. Give some thought to what it means to live in the grace of God as opposed to living under the law.

Day Seventeen

Grace To Be Righteous

Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. - Matthew 5:19

Jesus is making a point by putting forth a lot of effort emphasizing the importance of the law. Why do you think he is doing that, especially in light of his statement that he had come to fulfill the law?

Many have concluded that if Christ fulfilled the law, and I am saved by grace through faith and not of works, then, regardless of what I do after I am saved I continue in right relationship with God. Jesus knew that tendency in man so he warns against careless living.

A friend once approached me about the spiritual condition of his son. His son was openly living in sin and justifying it by saying that he was not under law but under grace. My friend asked me if I thought his son had lost his salvation.

That is a question asked by many. However, it is the wrong question. Perhaps the question should be about whether the young man was saved in the first place. The message of grace is not a free pass to sin but it is the ability, through faith in Christ, to live righteously. If we continue in sin without the remorse of repentance and justify our behavior the

chances are very good that we have not been born again.

Yes, I know we are walking a tight rope here. There is a fine line between living righteously by grace and being bound to righteousness through legalism, but the line is there none the less and we must learn to walk on the side of grace without violating righteousness.

It is the grace, favor that we did not deserve, of God that Christ came to earth to become the atonement for our sins and to give us a heart for righteousness. Let us continue to walk in grace teaching others that we are to live righteously and if we fail in that endeavor we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ (1 John 2:1).

Prayer: Thank you for the grace and righteousness that I have through faith in Christ. Grant me the heart to live out the righteousness of Christ In Jesus name. Amen.

Message: Let us continue to walk in grace teaching others that we are to live righteously and if we fail in that endeavor we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ.

Affirmation: It is the Holy Spirit abiding in me, by God's grace, which enables me to live righteously.

Reflection: Here is a point to consider; is there a difference between sinning and appealing to grace for forgiveness and sinning with the assumption that grace will cover the sin?

Day Eighteen

Were the Pharisees Really Righteous?

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. - Matthew 5:20

If I had been listening to Jesus say that I would probably have given up on the spot. The Pharisees were so holy I could never hope to be that holy, much less to be more righteous than they are. How could this be?

The answer is not on the way they looked on the outside, or on the righteous acts they performed. The answer is what was in their heart. The rest of this chapter in Matthew deals with attitudes of the heart as Jesus explains what he meant by righteousness that surpasses the righteousness of the Pharisees.

It wouldn't be fair to accuse the Pharisees of being insincere in their attempt to be righteous. In fact, over the centuries they had developed many volumes of writings that defined the law so keenly that it was a standard no man could live up to. The Pharisees, through asceticism and rigid discipline had come close, but they had also become cynical, judgmental and calloused against any feeling for others.

They stood on street corners saying prayers, paid tithe on the herbs from their gardens, and at the same time were merciless to the widows and the needy. They had the law in their head but hardness in their heart. Ezekiel calls their heart, "A heart of stone" (Ezekiel 36:26).

The solution was not in understanding the law better but it was to have a heart transplant. Ezekiel says, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will... give you a heart of flesh."

The only way to be more righteous than the Pharisees was to move religion from the head to the heart. When our heart is changed by the grace of God we then, by the new nature living in us, live a righteousness that surpasses the righteousness of the Pharisees.

Prayer: Father, grant me the grace of a pure heart, a new heart. Let my heart be set on pleasing you. I don't want to just appear righteous to others I want to be righteous through faith in Christ In Jesus name.

Message: The only way to be more righteous than the Pharisees was to move religion from the head to the heart. When our heart is changed by the grace of God we then, by the new nature living in us, live a righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees.

Affirmation: Legalism does not make us righteous. Our righteousness comes through having our heart changed and being given a new Spirit.

Reflection: Do you understand how the righteousness of believers exceeds the righteousness of the Pharisees? What is it that makes the difference between Pharisaical righteousness and the righteousness which comes by the grace of God?

Day Nineteen

Kingdom Rules Written On Our Heart

I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. - Ezekiel 36:25-27

In this prophecy the prophet Ezekiel reveals the secret to the success of the kingdom of God. The issues were not doctrinal, or where one should worship, or how one was to worship. The issue was singular and is dealt with in this prophecy.

The issue is that the people called by God to follow him had become defiled. They were unclean because of their debauchery and idol worship. There was only one way to reconcile that. Regardless of how many sacrifices of atonement they offered their hearts were still set on the pleasures offered by idolatry and their heart needed to be changed.

We've all heard the axiom, "You can take a pig out of the pig pen but you can't take the pig pen out of the pig." That is exactly what religion tries to do. That is what the Jews were trying to do for centuries; they were trying to turn sinners into saints by cleaning them up and telling them how one should live. It didn't work, they were still sinners.

God gives the purpose of the kingdom in a nutshell in this prophecy. He said he would give them a new heart - a heart that is turned

toward him instead of idols. And finally, he said he would give them a new Spirit, his Spirit.

Through repentance we are cleansed in the waters of forgiveness. Repentance releases reconciliation with God through faith in Jesus the Christ of Redemption and gives us a new heart. Once redeemed the Holy Spirit gives us a new Spirit as we gain entrance into the kingdom of God. Now we who have become the anointed have received the spirit of restoration and as we are being restored.

Prayer: I can see your purpose is to restore people to your glory. Grant me the grace and the will to participate in that purpose. Amen.

Message: Repentance releases reconciliation with God through faith in Jesus the Christ of Redemption and gives us a new heart. Once redeemed the Holy Spirit gives us a new Spirit as we gain entrance into the kingdom of God.

Affirmation: I have repented and have been reconciled to God and renewed in the Holy Spirit. I am also being reconciled to God each time I sin by continuing in repentance and I am being renewed daily.

Reflection: Think of the illustration in the devotion which said, "You can take a pig out of the pig pen, but you can't take the pig pen out of the pig." What does that mean in the context of the old way of trying to be religious as compared to the new heart and new Spirit of Ezekiel 36?

Day Twenty

You Have Heard... But I Say...

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, "Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment." But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. - Matthew 5:21-22

Immediately after telling his followers that their righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees Jesus begins to explain what he meant. The Pharisees taught the tradition of retribution for killing another without cause, but they did not address the cause of the murder. They taught judgment for murder while carrying bitterness and hatred toward others in their own heart.

Jesus was teaching that the deed committed was no worse in the eyes of God and in the kingdom than the malice that was in the heart.

The Pharisees were good men who were trying to live out a faith that was impossible to live. They had so finely defined the law that there was no room for tolerance and their own failure to live by their standards was a glaring witness to the inadequacy of the system.

Again Jesus is showing that there is a distinction between religion and kingdom life. Religion sets the rules but offers nothing to enable a person to live by them while offering condemnation for those who can't. In the kingdom we are given the answer; deeds come from the heart and the challenge to have a clean heart is greater than the challenge to act right.

The only way our righteousness can exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees is to undergo heart surgery. That is what Jesus is talking about in the Sermon on the Mount. All that the Pharisees were missing was a heart transplant, but it was their religion hardened heart that prevented them from seeing what Jesus was offering them.

The world has said, "Thou shalt not," but Jesus has said, "Even that is not enough; you must rid your heart of all malice." The kingdom demands what the Pharisees couldn't offer and what Jesus makes available to all who believe.

Prayer: Lord, grant me the grace to keep my heart free of religion and submitted to you. Help me to have a clean and pure heart. Grant me your righteousness. In Jesus name, amen.

Message: There is a distinction between religion and kingdom life. Religion sets the rules but offers nothing to enable a person to live by them while offering condemnation for those who can't. In the kingdom we are given the answer; deeds come from the heart and the challenge to have a clean heart is greater than the challenge to act right.

Affirmation: I am able to keep a pure heart only by the working of Holy Spirit in me. It is the grace of God that gives me the opportunity to have a pure heart.

Reflection: What is your understanding of the effect of having hatred in your heart as opposed to actually carrying out the murder you feel toward others?

Day Twenty One

Unresolved Anger is Deadly

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, "Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment:" But I say unto you, that whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. - Matthew 5:21-22 (KJV)

As we learn about righteousness which exceeds that of the Pharisees we have to look to the cause behind our deeds, or at least the cause that is behind what we would do if the law didn't prohibit it.

Most of us have known that person who seemed to be seething with anger and was just waiting for a chance to boil over onto someone. They seem to be angry at everyone and everything and it just takes a little bit to get them to express their anger.

We must realize that anger is not evil, but unresolved anger leads to evil intent. I like the Amplified Bible rendering of this passage. It reads, "I say to you that everyone who continues to be angry with his brother or harbors malice (enmity of heart) against him shall be liable to and unable to escape the punishment imposed by the court." The Amplified seems to emphasize that unresolved anger leads to malice harbored in the heart.

Unresolved anger is the issue here. Anger unresolved leads to bitterness and bitterness leads to death, either physical or emotional. In the kingdom of God we cannot despise people

of other races, other lifestyles, other cultures, and, yes, of other religions.

If we do carry a seething anger against another person or persons we are guilty of a grave sin and in need of forgiveness. Examine your heart to see if you harbor enmity against another person then deal with it righteously.

Paul addresses this issue in Ephesians 4:26-27, "In your anger do not sin; Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold." Taking your anger to bed with you will not only keep you awake but it gives the enemy of your peace the opportunity to get a foothold in your heart.

Prayer: Lord, grant me the grace to resist carrying anger toward others. Help me to resolve any anger issues daily. In Jesus name.

Message: Anger unresolved leads to bitterness and bitterness leads to death, either physical or emotional. If we do carry a seething anger against another person or group we are guilty of a grave sin and in need of forgiveness.

Affirmation: When I am angry, I settle the issue quickly so a seed of bitterness is not formed in my spirit.

Reflection: Anger is not sin, but unresolved anger can lead to sin. Anger comes from being hurt or offended by another person. Who has offended you? Do you still carry a bruise in your spirit over a past offence? Give some careful thought to that question and if you do, get it resolved quickly.

Day Twenty Two

Disrespect is a Form of Murder

You have heard that it was said... “Do not murder”... But I say... Anyone who says to his brother, “Raca,” is answerable to the Sanhedrin. - Matthew 5:22

We have all seen the time when we were in heated argument with another person and in the passion of the moment we attacked that persons character. In anger we used knowledge we had, or even stuff we made up, to insult them. When I have done that I was left feeling empty as my words had boomeranged and returned to hit me.

The word translated “*raca*” here literally means one who is empty, worthless and has no value. The Amplified Bible says it like this, “Whoever speaks contemptuously and insultingly to his brother shall be liable to and unable to escape the judgment imposed by the Sanhedrin.” Jesus is saying that disrespecting another person is like killing them.

I remember a time when I overheard a conversation the person I considered my best friend was having with another friend. He didn’t know I could hear him and he was talking about how he couldn’t stand me. It was many years ago, and I don’t remember the reasons he gave for not liking me, but I still feel the sting of those words.

It is not a sin to become angry or upset with someone, but it is a sin if we don’t deal with our anger in an appropriate manner. If my anger drives me to insulting you, then I am

limiting the effect that I can have with you and the effect that you can have with me.

One of the great challenges in disagreements is to be able to separate the issue from the individual. I can passionately disagree with you without placing judgment on you and condemning you for your position on the issue. Once we go down the slippery slope of disrespecting others we are participating in the eventual death of respect for all others.

It requires effort, but it is much better to use words that bind friendships together than it is to use words that destroy relationships.

Prayer: Father, forgive me for ever disrespecting another person because of a disagreement and help me to use words of peace. In Jesus name, amen.

Message: It is not a sin to become angry or upset with someone, but it is a sin if we don't deal with our anger in an appropriate manner. If my anger toward you drives me to insulting you, then I am limiting the effect that I can have with you and that you can have with me.

Affirmation: I have purposed to deal with anger in an appropriate manner in order that my life will have a positive effect on others.

Reflection: One of the great challenges in disagreements is to be able to separate the issue from the individual. I can passionately disagree with you without placing judgment on you and condemning you for your position on the issue. Practice thinking of ways to separate the issue from the individual.

Day Twenty Three

Character Assassination is Equal to Murder

You have heard that it was said... “Do not murder”... But I say... Anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ is in danger of the fire of hell.

- Matthew 5:22

Have you ever heard it said of another person, or you may have said it yourself (I know I have), “He doesn’t have the sense God gave a goose”? This passage addresses just such a situation. However, the real application goes beyond a casual comment made in passing, it applies to carrying a bitterness that urges you to assassinate their character.

The word translated “you fool” here literally means one who is empty headed, dull or stupid. The Amplified Bible says it like this, “Whoever says, ‘You cursed fool [You empty-headed idiot] shall be liable to and unable to escape the hell of fire.” The idea seems to be that if we can kill the influence of a person we have killed his ability to be effective. His influence is dead.

There was a time when I felt another brother had done me wrong. I was angry. In fact, I was not only angry but I was becoming bitter. It got to the place that I would talk about how “evil” he was to others. I was trying to destroy his effectiveness as a leader. In reality I was the only one being harmed by my anger and bitterness.

There was a day God got through to my heart and convicted me to forgive the brother. I did

forgive him and in fact I contacted him and asked him to forgive me. Then I called my friends and apologized for spreading my bitterness to them.

From that moment joy was restored to my heart and my peace returned. I learned a valuable lesson from that experience. If I am in disagreement with someone else I cannot allow that to become bitterness in my heart so I guard my heart against bitterness and the result is God has given me great peace.

Examine your heart to see if there is any seed of bitterness there that causes you to harbor ill feelings toward another. It makes no difference if the other person is right or wrong; if you harbor malice you are wrong.

Prayer: Lord, it is so easy to allow my anger toward another to become a campaign of vengeance. Protect my heart from that evil. Amen.

Message: We must learn to guard against carrying thoughts of malice against another and the result will be great peace from God.

Affirmation: When I am in disagreement with someone I settle the matter quickly so a seed of bitterness will not grow in my heart.

Reflection: If we have spoken disparaging words against another person when they have done us wrong then we need to ask them to forgive us, and we must forgive them for doing us wrong.

Day Twenty Four

Be Reconciled To Your Brother

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother, then come and offer your gift.

- Matthew 5:23-24

What seems to be implied in this instruction is that the person about to make the offering is at fault and needs to make things right with another person. However, there is nothing in the text that requires us to come to that conclusion. The fault could just as well be with the other person who has a grievance with the one offering.

In college I was responsible for closing the dining room and the kitchen after a meal. There was another person who resented me having a job that he thought should be his. Every day he pushed me to the limit when I told him it was time to leave because I had to lock up.

One day he got very belligerent and offered to fight me. Now, we were both ministerial students and fighting was not the way we usually settled disagreements. He finally left and I finished my job.

I was feeling a bit bad about the altercation, so I went to the prayer room to get my heart right over it. I wasn't getting anywhere in my prayers. I could hear the other fellow in the next room praying and he didn't seem to be

getting anywhere either, so I went to the room where he was praying to reconcile with him.

I hadn't done anything wrong, but my brother did have a grievance against me. My prayers were being hindered because I was angry over the situation and I was trying to make it right between God and me instead of making it right with my brother. Once I talked it through with the other person I was able to have peace in my own prayers.

The principle is that broken relationships affect our ability to come to the altar and we must do all that we can to restore what has been broken. We are not given the luxury of saying, "Well, he offended me and he will have to come to me to make it right." We can do that, but we won't have peace until it is made right. Why wait on the other person?

Prayer: Lord, help me to humble myself to seek reconciliation even when I don't think I'm at fault. In Jesus name, amen.

Message: Broken relationships affect our ability to come to the altar and we must do all that we can to restore what has been broken.

Affirmation: When I have a grievance against another person I will settle it and then I can again be in close relationship with God.

Reflection: I have known many people who have carried offence against another person until they lost their peace with God and they still blamed the other person. To be at peace with God we must be reconciled to others.

Day Twenty Five

The Truth About Adultery

You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

- Matthew 5:27-28

There is no doubt that these words got the attention of the crowd. They were quite familiar with the command to not commit adultery, but this was certainly a new concept. How does one keep from lusting? Lust has been a universal problem ever since there was more than one man and one woman.

According to what Jesus said here we are all guilty of adultery, well, at least nearly all of us. When a man looks at a woman who is not his wife and wants to sleep with her he is sinning. The difference between the sin of adultery and the sin of lust is that the sin of lust may be secret and no one knows.

Is there a remedy for this universal sin? Well, Jesus offered one effective remedy. Verse 29 records, "If your right eye causes you to sin, 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." There has got to be another remedy.

James wrote, "Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin" (v14-15). The secret to conquering lust is to conquer unhealthy desire.

Where does desire come from? It comes from the heart. The way to conquer unhealthy desire is to change the heart.

Plucking out the eye will not remove lust from the heart. That can only be done by submitting the heart to the power of the Christ. Jesus, the Christ of Redemption, opens the door for the Holy Spirit to give us a renewed heart and spirit.

God is calling us to a higher standard than that of the Pharisees. They were content with the law just as it was; they could look as long as they didn't touch. God's standard is get the lust out of your heart. When our desire is for him then no unhealthy desire can affect us.

Prayer: OK Lord, you know I have looked at the opposite sex in that way. Grant me the grace to have a pure heart and desire for you alone. In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen.

Message: The secret to conquering lust is to conquer unhealthy desire. Where does desire come from? It comes from the heart. The way to conquer unhealthy desire is to change the heart.

Affirmation: I keep lust out of my heart by continually submitting my heart to God and His grace cleanses me from all impure desires.

Reflection: As long as we are in the body of flesh we are going to struggle with the desires of the flesh that is why James tells us, "Submit yourselves therefore to God, resist the devil and he will flee from you" (James 4:7).

Day Twenty Six

The Truth About Divorce

It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife except for marital unfaithfulness causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

- Matthew 5:32-32

Few subjects have caused more questions in the body of Christ than divorce and remarriage. Scholars on one side have looked for reasons to justify divorce and scholars on the other side have looked for reasons to condemn divorce. Both sides seem to miss the point.

On this issue Jesus stays with the point. He is pointing out how the rules of the Pharisees break down when intent is considered. From murder to divorce the primary sin is the condition of the heart - the deed itself was just acting out what was already in the heart.

God intended for marriage to be between one man and one woman and that it was to be for a lifetime. That is God's perfect plan, but he also knew the truth about the human condition. In Matthew 19 Jesus gives more insight into how God deals with divorce.

In the law of Moses divorce was allowed and in the rules of the Pharisees the allowable reasons for divorce opened the door for divorce for just about any reason. When questioned about the law of Moses Jesus said,

“Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard” (Matthew 19:8).

Back to the point: Jesus was addressing the condition of the heart more than the condition of the marriage. Regardless of your past experience with marriage and divorce you must remember that it is only by God’s grace that any of us are able to approach him. Your past will not affect your present if your heart is right with God today.

In this passage, every time Jesus made reference to what had been taught he inserted the caveat, “But I tell you.” And what he told them is that intent and condition of the heart are the factors he considers. The only way our righteousness can exceed that of the Pharisees is to have a clean and pure heart before God.

Prayer: Lord, I thank you for the forgiveness that comes through Christ. Grant me the grace to have a pure and clean heart. Amen.

Message: Jesus taught that intent and condition of the heart are the factors he considers. The only way our righteousness can exceed that of the Pharisees is to have a clean and pure heart before God.

Affirmation: I am committed to keeping my heart pure so that I do not have to manipulate the facts to justify my behavior.

Reflection: It is true that we are held accountable for our actions, but it is also true that God considers our motivation as well as our actions. Reflect on the idea that the intent of our heart is as important as our actions.

Day Twenty Seven

Let Your word be "Yes" or "No"

Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, "Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord." But I tell you, "Do not swear at all."

- Matthew 5:33-34

We've all known that person who felt compelled to swear on his mother's grave that something was true and you knew all the time he was lying through his teeth. Another good one is, "I want to tell you the honest truth." Doesn't that make you wonder about the truth of the other things he has been telling you?

Jesus goes on to say that we should not swear by heaven, because that is God's throne, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. In fact, he goes on to say that we should not swear by our head because we can't make one hair white or black (verses 35-36). If you can't make it, don't swear by it.

So, how does one emphasize the truth of what one is saying? That is real simple. Jesus was telling them that their words and their life should reflect such integrity that when they said "Yes," it was believed and when they said, "No," it was accepted.

The power of our words is not in how emphatic we are about them but in how truthful we are perceived as being.

We should be careful not to comment on every subject as if we know more about it than

others. When we do that people begin to wonder why it so important to us that we appear to be so well informed and they question whether we know as much as we claim to know.

A fool is known by his many words with little meaning and the wise man is known by his few words with great meaning. It isn't always what was said but how many words it took to say it that impresses or depresses people. Some think before they speak and others too often speak before they think. Tell the truth in a few words.

Prayer: Lord, I keep wanting to speak too quickly then feel that I must swear it is true. Help me to be slow to speak. Amen.

Message: The power of our words is not in how emphatic we are about them but in how truthful we are perceived as being. Our words and our life should reflect such integrity that when we say "Yes," it is believed and when we say, "No," it is accepted.

Affirmation: When I speak it is the truth and I don't need to emphasize it with an oath.

Reflection: We should ever be careful that our words do not undermine our integrity. I know people who are not careful to be precise in speaking about events and you begin to wonder if they are exaggerating or just misremembering. Consider this: If you feel that you have to emphasize your words with an oath then maybe you don't have much confidence in your own word.

Day Twenty Eight

Retribution or Grace - Which is Right?

You have heard that it was said, “eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.” But I tell you, “Do not resist an evil person.” - Matthew 5:38-39

Under the Law of Moses one could retaliate against an offender up to the extent of the offense. If one person stole a cow from another person the person stolen from was allowed to take a cow, or something of equal value, from the thief. The offended person was not allowed to burn down the thief's house and barn.

God knew that the hearts of men would harbor bitterness and vengeance toward those who offended them and his purpose was not to demand justice but to insure that an injustice was not perpetrated in the name of getting justice.

The purpose of the law was to limit retribution not guarantee that an offender must pay the price. By the time Jesus arrived the Pharisees had refined the process of retribution to an art and held others accountable to a law that they could not keep in their own hearts.

The law said that we have the right to exact payment for wrongs committed against us, yet grace cries out, “Let it be. I'll see that justice is done.” The written law leaves it up to fallen man to determine what is a just response; faith allows the mercy of God to be extended that man might come to repentance.

When we have been born again and our heart has been changed then we look at others differently. On the other side of the cross we demand justice for what others have done to us; on this side of the cross we offer grace and pray that men everywhere will come to repentance.

The old way was to bring men to lawful obedience - the new way is to bring men into relationship with Jesus, the Christ of Redemption.

Prayer: Lord, help me to keep my heart free from desiring vengeance against those who have offended me. In Jesus name, amen.

Message: The old way was to bring men to lawful obedience - the new way is to bring men into relationship with Jesus, the Christ of Redemption. The law demands justice, grace calls us to forbearance.

Affirmation: I do not try to extract justice to the limit of the law, rather I consider how my response will affect the others involved.

Reflection: Jesus introduced a very deep issue which seems to get to the core of the faith. Just how far should we take the instruction, "Do not resist an evil person"? It is one thing to turn the other cheek, but quite another to ignore missiles pointed at your country. Is there a line to draw and if there is, where is that line?

Day Twenty Nine

Turn The Other Cheek

Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. - Matthew 5:29-42

There is a truth hidden in this passage that when understood and practiced will turn any person into a peacemaker. See if you can detect this divine principle in this devotion.

People in the western world spend massive amounts of time, energy and money to combat evil and the result is that prisons house more inmates and communities have not been made safer. Why is that? Are we perpetuating violence rather than stopping violence?

Take 12 people and line them up. Instruct the first to slap the second, the second to slap the third, etc. through the entire line. If that continues you will have 12 angry people who are probably busy slapping each other. But let's say that the first person slaps the second and the second slaps the third. The third looks at the second and says, "This has got to stop and it stops with me. I will not strike number four." The violence has ended.

I know that is simplistic but it is at least a beginning. Suppose we change the way we think about the aggressor. Suppose that instead of responding with appropriate retaliation we respond with, "What can I do to make things easier for you?"

Jesus said, "If someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well." What would compel a person who has just received an injustice to be more generous than was asked of him?

In Jesus day a Roman soldier could require a local citizen to carry his gear, but only for a mile. What would happen if the citizen said, "Sir, I would be willing to carry your gear for another mile?"

Have you figured out the principle? God employed this principle when he gave us Jesus. "For God so loved the world that he gave..." Think about how you can love and give.

Prayer: Father, help me to love others as you have loved me. Amen.

Message: Suppose we change the way we think about the aggressor. Suppose that instead of responding with appropriate retaliation we respond with, "What can I do to make things easier for you?"

Affirmation: Rather than think of how I can retaliate against an aggressor I consider how I can help relieve the cause of his aggression.

Reflection: God knew what would happen to Jesus when he came to earth preaching the kingdom and Jesus knew his destiny. That fact gives meaning to his teaching about turning the cheek and going the extra mile. So how do we do that? The same way he did: "For God so loved the world that he gave..." Think about it.

Day Thirty

Love Your... Who? - Your Enemies!

You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I tell you: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven." - Matthew 5:43-45

Jesus does it again. He introduces a concept that is entirely foreign to the way people think and makes that the standard for being in the kingdom of God. We all know that we should love our friends, brothers and neighbors, but loving our enemies? That just isn't human!

As you think about these things remember that Jesus is asking people to participate in a kingdom that exceeds the limits of humanity. He is asking people to submit their humanity to divine empowerment. That might be why his domain is called "The kingdom of heaven," and "The kingdom of God."

In the verses that follow our text Jesus says, "If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?" So how do we love our enemies?

First, we must define enemy. What makes one my enemy? Perhaps an enemy would be one who intends to do an injustice to myself or to those I care about. An enemy might be someone who intends to treat me unfairly in a business deal. Maybe he even intends to take my home.

An enemy might be one on the job who is trying to take my position.

Do you notice a common thread? Every threat my enemy has is connected to things in this world. If I have surrendered my life to Christ and have declared all that I am and all that I have are his, how can this person harm me? How can he truly be my enemy?

Here is an interesting thought: To have an enemy one must be willing to be an enemy. For a person to be my enemy I must be willing to be his enemy. How can I be his enemy when I am commanded by God to love him?

Prayer: Lord, it is not an easy thing you ask. Help me to be so committed to your kingdom that I have no enemy. Amen.

Messaes: Every threat my enemy has is connected to things in this world. If I have surrendered my life to Christ and have declared all that I am and all that I have are his, how can this person harm me? How can he truly be my enemy?

Affirmation: I have surrendered my life and declared all that I am and all that I have are his. Now, no one can harm me or mine because I belong to Christ, and so does all that I have.

Reflection: We should carefully consider the last paragraph of this devotion, " Here is an interesting thought: To have an enemy one must be willing to be an enemy. For a person to be my enemy I must be willing to be his enemy. How can I be his enemy when I am commanded by God to love him?"

Day Thirty One

The Conclusion of the Matter

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. - Matthew 5:48

We have looked at the last 30 verses of Matthew five that have been telling us that our righteousness must surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees in ways that are impossible for any man to live up to in his own strength, then the final word is that the only standard which God accepts is perfection.

If centuries of trying has not accomplished perfection, how in the world is it ever going to happen? If man is inherently flawed and perfection is beyond his grasp, why did Jesus give this command, "Be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect?"

A well used cliché is appropriate here: "Where God guides he provides." If God did not intend to enable us to be perfect he would never have commanded it to be so.

Look at the eight times Jesus said, "But I tell you..." then tell me how many of those you can do in your own strength. I've looked at them and there isn't one I can do in my own ability. Then how are we going to do it?

Jesus revealed the secret to Nicodemus: "You must be born again." We were born into a corrupt world with a corruptible nature. That nature which is corruptible must be submitted to a new nature, a nature that is incorruptible.

No passage illustrates this better than what is written in 1 Peter 1:22-23(KJV): Seeing ye

have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently. Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God...

The disciples asked Jesus, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus answered, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:25-26). We can do it through faith in Christ.

Prayer: God, grant me the grace to live in the power of the incorruptible Christ which lives in me. In Jesus name, amen.

Message: We were born into a corrupt world with a corruptible nature. That nature which is corruptible must be submitted to a new nature, a nature that is incorruptible. Perfection only comes by being born again of incorruptible seed, divine seed.

Affirmation: In my own ability I can never reach perfection, but through Christ I am made perfect. I have been born again - born of incorruptible seed. I have been born of God.

Reflection: Throughout this chapter in Matthew Jesus has been making reference to our heart and our attitude. Do you think that when he is speaking of being perfect he may be addressing those issues as more important than our actions? And maybe he is saying that when we get our heart right and our motivations right we will then live right.