

RELATING LIKE
JESUS



39 steps through
the sermon on the mount

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Introduction

Life is shaped by our relationships.

It is not just about what people say or do to us - which may make us feel happy or sad ... it is about how we react to others, and choose our lifestyle.

People who feel unloved will find it hard to build others up. But those who know they are loved and welcomed by God, should want to relate like Jesus, as citizens of His kingdom. They will make a positive godly difference even in the darkest places.

These 39 steps through the Sermon on the Mount explore what Jesus said, which matched the way He lived, even when His life was hardest. He has given us practical examples of how to embrace a way of living that pleases God and builds up other people. As we relate like Jesus, we also grow more confident in God's love - as we let His teaching mould the way we interact with others.

Each of the 39 steps includes the text of the Bible verses, a reliable explanation of what Jesus meant, some practical applications and a prayer – with space to write notes. The last page in the book is blank - to record the key principles you have discovered and the actions you want to follow through.

These devotionals, part of the Word@Work commentary of the New Testament (wordatwork.org.uk), are suitable for personal or group study.

May the Lord bless you as you learn how to live in His kingdom.

Training is a Priority

Matthew 5:1-2

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

Many people think that Jesus wanted to preach to everybody and heal as many people as possible before He died. Not so! His ministry was to the whole world and not just to Israel; for every generation and not just the times in which He lived. The priority of His two and a half years of public ministry was to train a small group of disciples who would become His apostles, and pass the gospel truth to every generation until Jesus returns (Luke 1:1-4; John 20:30-31).

That is why, when the crowds came flocking to Him, we read that Jesus often moved away from them (Mark 1:35-39). Jesus did not want to gather massive crowds – often they were a hindrance to the ‘training course’ and what the disciples could learn from each episode of ministry. In these verses, as Jesus moved up the mountain the disciples surrounded Him. Although the crowds came, He primarily addressed His trainee apostles. It was their basic teaching about how to live in God's kingdom. Although Jesus would do amazing miracles, none of them had any enduring meaning without a divine explanation (Matthew 13:10-13).

So, the ‘Sermon on the Mount’, as Augustine called it, laid out the radically different way in which God saw the world and His church, compared with the religious establishment. Jesus sat down and taught as a Rabbi, making statements, and answering questions (as the sermon proceeds from Matthew 5:3-7:27 you can almost hear the questions to which Jesus replies!). What He said challenged the religious presumptions of the day, even though all the principles were already embedded in the Old Testament text. The trainee

apostles needed to understand why Jesus was different, so that they could explain it clearly to others - in order that multiple generations might put their trust in Him.

‘Training leaders who can train other leaders’, has always been God's priority (2 Timothy 2:2). It is essential for the growth of the church in every age. Yet, that strategy might seem short-sighted: why invest heavily in a few people when you can reach millions? It is true that media ministries today do reach many more people than a single local church, but there is no real accountability. That was the factor which turned Jesus' teaching into discipleship: He had the twelve men with Him all the time and He held them to account for what they said and did. That is the kind of relationship which enables people to change, because they are challenged to be different by choosing a different set of responses. It is easy to make churches popular by giving what people like; but it is difficult to make true disciple-making disciples because they have to give up their selfish ambitions and live a lifestyle which pleases God but is despised by the world. Are you a real disciple? If so, are you training others to be accountable to Jesus?

Prayer

Father God. Thank You for Jesus who taught us how to live in a way which pleases You, and demonstrated that it is possible. Forgive me when I am more concerned about what other people think about me than what You think of my lifestyle. Thank You that Jesus chose trainee leaders to live with Him, learn from Him and be accountable to Him. Please help me to be more accountable to godly people and encourage others who want to learn from me. May I be a part of the strategic growth of Your kingdom. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

Blessed are the Poor in Spirit

Matthew 5:3

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (NIVUK)

Jesus Christ came into the world to bless us, by turning us from our sins and self-centred rebellion (Acts 3:26). And so, at the beginning of His public ministry, Jesus announced God's blessings for people who repent, receive God's Spirit and develop a Christ-like character. The eight blessings (beatitudes) are promises of heaven-sent contentment and joy despite difficult worldly circumstances. They are all counter-cultural – nobody in the world would set out to get good things for themselves like this. Neither are they rewards for good behaviour or spiritual achievement. They are God's gifts which flow from His grace.

To be 'poor in spirit', is to be empty of self-seeking and to be content with whatever God gives or allows. It is the opposite to being 'rich, or proud or haughty in spirit' – the arrogant attitude which comes from 'being someone', 'having things' and 'selfish assertion' (1 John 2:16). Those who are 'poor in spirit' place no confidence in their reputation, wealth or ability to get their own way. They identify with Job who said, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised." (Job 1:21). The Apostle Paul had a similar confidence (Philippians 4:11-13).

Such people are soft-hearted towards God. They neither demand from Him, nor blame Him for their circumstances (Job 13:15). They trust Him where they cannot see, because their hope is not in what they have or know, but in what He will give to those who love Him. They are certain that they are in His kingdom. Towards the end of His ministry Jesus reaffirmed the same promise: "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father;

take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.'" (Matthew 25:34).

How do we claim this promise? Not by anything we do, because it is God's gift (Ephesians 2:8-9). One day, every believer will enter His presence. In the meantime, the blessings of joy despite trouble (James 1:2-5), and contentment while still being in need, should be the daily confidence of the true child of God. We may not see the kingdom but we know that we are in it. We may have nothing, but we know that God will supply every need according to His riches in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:19). Those who are poor in spirit think little about themselves and everything about God; they are willing to let go of every treasure so that they can treasure Christ's company. This is quite a challenge to those of us who are so easily caught up with the world's values. So, it is worth asking the Lord to give His assessment of your spirit and then asking Him to help you to shape your desires so that they will be like God's.

Prayer

Gracious God. Thank You for this refreshing view of the character of those to whom You give Your perfect peace. I am sorry for the times when my attitudes are more shaped by earth than heaven; by my selfish desires than Your commands. Please help me to allow Your Holy Spirit to work in me so that I may develop a Christ-like character, and enjoy the blessing of deep inner confidence that I belong to Your kingdom. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

Blessed are those who Mourn

Matthew 5:4

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. (NIVUK)

Mourning expresses the grief we feel when we have lost somebody or something precious. We usually associate it with death. However, the most disastrous loss is our relationship with God; every sin spoils and kills its joyful transparency. The only way back is through repentance - grieving the loss of our relationship with Him; and confession - an intentional act of mourning as we admit the offence we have caused to God. That kind of mourning is the entry point for blessing, removing the curse of separation, so that we may receive forgiveness and grace to start a new life (Psalm 32:1-11).

There are two types of mourning - described in 2 Corinthians 7:10 as 'godly' and 'worldly' sorrow: "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death." 'Worldly sorrow' is a hopeless grief (1 Thessalonians 4:13) rooted in the belief that our future is only in this world, and therefore every loss is a tragedy which diminishes our destiny. 'Godly sorrow' comes from the belief that God is sovereign ... and therefore it is safe and good to be willing to count all things as loss for the sake of Christ (Philippians 3:7-9). Jim Elliot, the 20thC martyred missionary pilot said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain that which he cannot lose."

The comfort of the Lord is a very secure blessing (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). It is a deep inner assurance that although we place no confidence in ourselves, our achievements, our reputation, our friends or our possessions ... nevertheless, we are safe in Christ. This comfort is made all the more real to us as we read the Scriptures (Psalm 119:50; Romans 15:4). More than that, the Holy Spirit, who is the Comforter, comes to live within those who despair of their own virtue and

ask for His grace (John 14:16-18). So, the greatest blessing to all who mourn their failure, and reject worldly solutions, is the restored presence of the living God within us ... to assure us that we are fully loved, never forsaken and always provided for - whatever our circumstances.

Naturally, we would rather be happy than sad. The world offers many diversions to catch our attention and offers happiness instead of righteousness. But there is no blessing there, nor any lasting comfort. It is a divine paradox that the way forward after sin is not by 'forgetting it and moving on' but by going back to resolve past sin by repentance and confession - bringing it to the cross of Christ. Yet, when earthly things are taken away, the way forward is not to go back to them but to walk on with Christ, assured of His comfort and blessing. So, today's little verse is packed with challenge and decisions to make if we are to rejoice in His comfort. Two questions may help: what sin is still outstanding and needs to be taken to the cross of Christ; and, what earthly things do we wrongly mourn (like Lot's wife: Genesis 19:26)?

Prayer

God of all comfort. Thank You for being willing to comfort the poor and weary, and to forgive sinners. I am sorry for trying to 'move on' in my life without repenting of my sin. And I repent of yearning for the past instead of looking forward to meeting Jesus Christ and receiving His reward. Please help me to be honest with You about myself and my attitude towards the things and people around me, and bring me Your comfort. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

Blessed are the Meek

Matthew 5:5

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. (NIVUK)

‘Gaining the world’ (Mark 8:36) has been the military ambition of many would-be world rulers. Their method has been conquest by force; gaining ground by shedding blood. And, to an extent, they are successful; but eventually they all die or are deposed and others come to claim their empires. By contrast, this statement by Jesus is a radically different concept and leads to a permanent place and permanent peace for His people. The word 'meek' is not often used in common English anymore, and is often confused with 'weak'. However, the original Greek word really means 'gentle', 'non-assertive', 'quiet-hearted'; and in Hebrew there are additional meanings - 'humble' or even 'afflicted'. This is a huge contrast to the world's route to success.

Meekness is the quiet confidence of a contented and trusting heart which is satisfied in God – even in the midst of affliction. Moses was such a person (Numbers 12:3). The meek person has no need to fight or strive to achieve what God is planning to give (2 Timothy 2:24). The meek conscience is not struggling to secure the future, but trusts that the Lord has everything in His hands, and that He will give what is right at the right time. The meek person has time to listen, time to wait, time to pray and time to praise, because he or she is totally confident that they will not miss anything of God's best.

The statement that the meek will 'inherit the earth' is God's promise. But what does it mean? Jesus was quoting from Psalm 37:8-11, saying that personal anger is not God's solution in a wicked world: “Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret - it leads only to evil... But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy peace and prosperity.” The 'earth', in this verse, equates to 'land' (in Psalm

37:11), referring to the Promised Land of Canaan (Deuteronomy 34:4; Hebrews 11:9). But Jesus expanded its meaning beyond that of the Land given to Israel. So, there is a sense that meek people will occupy the space for them that God has ordained in this life and they will be at peace, however the Lord provides. But it also has a future meaning: "a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3:13) – when Jesus returns to claim His kingdom. Only those who now gladly submit to King Jesus will inherit their place and eternal peace with the King on that Day.

Our inner nature is easily inflamed to fight for what we want (James 4:1-3). It was true for Cain, but God urged him to resist that passion: "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it." (Genesis 4:7). The same spiritual discipline is essential in the Christian's life as we learn to walk in step with the Holy Spirit. Then we will start to acquire His characteristic of meekness. In Galatians 5:22-23 meekness is revealed in its component parts of “... love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control”. So, stop fighting, start trusting and keep on submitting ... accept whatever comes as from the Lord's hand and experience His peace. Then see what He will do with your life now, and look forward to His ultimate reward in His kingdom of peace.

Prayer

Loving Father. Thank You for the promises of goodness and peace which will come to us as we submit to Your authority. Forgive me for my habit of striving for what I want instead of quietly working alongside You, letting You take the strain. Please help me to learn how to trust You today and practise the peace of heart which You want me to enjoy. Whatever affliction I need to endure, please keep me trusting You, and looking forward to my place in Your eternal kingdom and everlasting peace. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

Blessed are those who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness

Matthew 5:6

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

Hunger and thirst are terrible experiences, but without those inbuilt body responses no baby would ever survive. They are necessary physiological alarms which alert the person to the need to take action and demand to be satisfied. Jesus used this physical illustration to apply to a deep inner desire to be in the right before God, to do what pleases God and to enjoy the favour and fellowship of God (Nehemiah 9:15).

The Old Testament story of God's people in the wilderness showed that He was concerned to meet their real needs; He provided them with manna (the word means 'what is it?' - a previously unknown food) for 40 years (Exodus 16:35). But He also showed that He was concerned for a far deeper need, the hunger of their souls for God (Isaiah 55:2). He promised to refresh the weary and satisfy the faint (Jeremiah 31:25). This soul-hunger is the result of soul-starvation ... if it is not satisfied, continued starvation starts to feel normal. Physically, we call that condition, anorexia; a very serious disease in which the person does not know how wasted they have become and has no appetite to be nourished.

It is a blessing to know our true condition, and to take the necessary steps to get right. Jesus said that it is healthy to feel hungry for God, to long for His love and desire His approval (Psalm 84:2). Indeed, like a baby crying for milk, those who cry out to the Lord will be satisfied (Job 34:28). The word 'pray', which we often use in a religious sense, simply means 'to cry out'. This is not just a cry to have physical needs met but a deep desire to grow in God and to be in the right before Him. It is a cry of need, helplessness and even desperation which the

Lord does not ignore.

But spiritual anorexia is all too common. Many people have a distorted image of their identity; they cannot see that they are created in God's image and need the nourishment of His word (Psalm 119:37). They cannot see themselves as God sees them; they do not believe that they need to be righteous before God. The promise of blessing is for them too; wherever people have been, all who cry out to the Lord will be saved (Acts 4:12). And those who have wandered from the Lord will be restored if they are hungry for His righteousness (Luke 15:32). For all of us, it is a daily decision to cry out to the Lord that we may be right with Him, as we repent and seek restoration. The more we desire His Word, the more we will grow strong to serve Him. The longer we delay, the more difficult it gets. So be hungry and thirsty today!

Prayer

Gracious God. Thank You for the deep inner instinct You have given to me to be right with You. Forgive me for the times when I have lived in spiritual starvation, not realising how much I need You. Please fill me again with a hunger for You. Please give me the grace to receive from You, so that I may walk confidently with You, and serve You in a way that pleases You. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

Blessed are the Merciful

Matthew 5:7

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. (NIVUK)

The cut and thrust of business life is all about getting the advantage: mercy is seen as a weakness to be despised, unless it is a way of manipulating people. Jesus never manipulated people: He specialised in helping weak people by showing mercy. Yet, He was despised for respecting women, rebuked for listening to children, disdained for meeting lepers, and ridiculed for welcoming corrupt and immoral people (Mark 2:16). When Jesus was crucified, they reviled him (Mark 15:29-31). Even so, He prayed that His Father would forgive them (Luke 23:34). They showed Jesus no mercy, and yet He showed mercy to the man crucified next to Him (Luke 23:39-43).

Mercy is a heart-attitude which is neither patronising nor condescending: it does not look down on those who are down, nor does it boast about its kindness. Mercy accepts that others are not worthy in themselves, and yet delights to lift them up with no thought of reward. This is a huge part of God's nature (Exodus 34:6). Mercy is a close relative to love, kindness and faithfulness: it applies loving kindness to people who do not deserve it. It withholds punishment and blesses the unlovely. If there was no mercy there would be no hope for sinners (1 Peter 1:3). But God is rich in mercy (Ephesians 2:4) which is why He is the author of hope.

Those who share God's heart will be merciful to others (Jude 1:22-23). They recognise their own weakness; they have no pride in their own holiness and know how much they have been forgiven. God trains His people to be merciful in an unusual way: He allows them to feel the weight of their own sin, the shame of their own rebellion, the weakness of their own nature and the wickedness of

their own heart. He does this in order to urge them to appeal to Him for mercy, and have the joyful personal experience of being ransomed, healed, restored and forgiven. Knowing that their sin has been put away, and a new start has been granted, they rejoice in God's mercy and freedom. That is the start of them being merciful to others and their joy is part of their blessing. It validates their humility of heart and opens the door for yet more mercy to be poured upon them (Psalm 51:1-19).

So, instead of criticising, know that the sinner in front of you will only change when they recognise God's love, repent and receive mercy. It may be that they have never experienced that kind of love, or been welcomed as a sinner by other people. Your act of mercy is a demonstration of the gospel, and when they ask, you can tell them how merciful God has been towards you in Christ. And yet we also keep sinning and the more we criticise others, the more tightly we get wedged into our own pride. So, being merciful to others reminds us of our own indebtedness to God; it helps us to rejoice in our own salvation and be glad that God's mercy is open to everyone. What a blessing!

Prayer

Merciful God. Thank You for not condemning me but saving me. I am so sorry for condemning others when I have no moral right to be superior to them. Instead, please help me to show Your love to those who would not expect it and do not think that they could deserve it. As I do so, please keep pouring Your mercy on me also, reminding me of Your love and keeping me from pride. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

Blessed are the Pure in Heart

Matthew 5:8

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. (NIVUK)

Purity is an absolute measure. Something is either pure or impure; it cannot be 99% pure ... because it is then impure. To be 'pure in heart' is to be 100% free from sin, and totally pleasing to God. "... without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). This is a tough standard, especially when we consider that holiness is not measured over an hour or a day – but over a lifetime.

Jesus places 'purity of heart' as the condition for seeing God. This seems an impossible objective because nobody except Jesus has ever lived a totally pure life (Hebrews 4:15). And we cannot make ourselves pure if we have previously been impure, because just one impurity disqualifies us from the joy of God's presence.

And yet Jesus promises joy in God's presence for those whose hearts are pure. How can this be? Although it is impossible for us to mask previous failure by good deeds, the death of Jesus paid for the offence of our impurity and as we repent of it, He takes it away (Psalm 103:12, Micah 7:19). So, our purity is not the result of our perfect record, but of His removal of our imperfections ... as His grace meets our repentance. Then we find great joy in experiencing the presence of God.

Our happiness is directly related to our purity, because any shadow of sin removes the joy of our salvation (Psalm 51:12). Every believer is urged to continue in pure living by discerning what is best (Philippians 1:10), refusing to complain and argue (Philippians 2:14-15) and by obeying the truth (1 Peter 1:22). Every time we fail, we need to repent, confess our sin and ask the Lord to take it

away (1 John 1:9). Living in the grace of Christ is the only route to real happiness and to the assurance of His presence with us each day until we see Him face to face.

Prayer

Holy God. Thank You for the joy of knowing that my sins are taken away as I confess them. I am sorry for being satisfied to live without the freedom of a clear conscience, and without the assurance of Your favour. Please help me to keep coming back to the cross of Christ, where His blood paid for all my impurity. And help me to have a new desire to keep living in holiness and purity - as I obey Your Word and ask for Your cleansing each day. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

Blessed are the Peacemakers

Matthew 5:9

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

'Peace', in the Bible, is not primarily a warm emotional feeling or sense of relaxation, but the absence of hostility – particularly peace with God (Romans 5:1). So, 'peace with God' is a declaration that God is not angry with those who put their faith in Jesus. As they welcome His love and repent of their sin they are fully forgiven. Peace comes when anger goes. That is also true about our human relationships, but it needs sin to be dealt with and not covered up.

God the Father is the God of Peace who crushes the enmity which Satan brings between us and God and other people (Romans 16:20). God the Son is the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). The purpose of Jesus Christ is to bring peace through His blood (Colossians 1:19-21), although many people continue to resist His peace-making (Luke 19:41-43). Peace-making is in the Father's nature and in the Son's commission. It is also in God the Holy Spirit's nature (Galatians 5:22), and through Him it becomes a part of the believer's nature too (Romans 8:6).

Peacemakers put themselves between two warring parties. It is a dangerous position because either might decide that the peacemaker is the enemy! But without help, hatred (which is endemic in the human heart) will only get worse. And so, God appointed His Son as a peace-maker even though He would be hated for it (Luke 20:13-15). In the same way, He appointed His apostles to be peacemakers and predicted that they would be hated too (John 15:18-23). It was the same for John the Baptist who was imprisoned and beheaded for his faith (Matthew 14:3-12), and for Jesus who was crucified ... likewise, most of the apostles came to an early and violent death. They were behaving as children of God seeking to bring peace with God through the gospel. Although they died,

many were saved through their ministry and brought into God's peace.

Every child of God should be a peacemaker. Peace-making between people who are separated from each other validates a Christian's spiritual roots and expresses their 'spiritual genes'. As they do their God-given work, the Holy Spirit fills them with joy and peace. They are truly happy even though they risk everything for the sake of Christ. They do not bring peace by negotiating compromise but by promoting righteousness in Christ. They are gospel people. Peace with God can only come through believing the gospel; so, they share the gospel whatever the risk. They are also concerned to bring peace wherever it is lacking, pouring love onto hatred, like Jesus did. It is always a challenge, but today is a good day for peace-making: ask the Lord to show you how to be a child of God in practice.

Prayer

God of peace. Thank You for bringing peace to my heart as I believed the gospel and started to receive Your love. I am sorry for the times when I have not been interested to bring Your peace into a situation, or when I have held back for fear of getting hurt. Please help me to develop Your peace-making instincts and to find joy as I am willing to risk my own welfare for the sake of others. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

Blessed are those who are Persecuted

Matthew 5:10-12

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 'Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (NIVUK)

This may seem very strange. How can anyone be happy, contented, joyful and blessed when they are being persecuted and insulted? Jesus said that persecution is a normal part of being in His kingdom: "Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also." (John 15:20)

Persecution is not a happy event in itself, but joy comes in looking beyond the suffering to God's glorious reward (Hebrews 12:2). Jesus did not enjoy the prospect of pain (Matthew 26:39), but He suffered it [the word 'suffer' originally meant 'allow'] because it was the only way to fulfil the Father's will and to bring many children to share in His glory (Hebrews 2:10). Like childbirth, the pain of persecution has a purpose; it is temporary and anticipates a joyful outcome (Galatians 4:19).

Persecution may be through physical violence, hateful words, slander, libel, loss of employment, social isolation, injustice, unfair discrimination against family members, imprisonment and even death. Our natural instincts to protect possessions, home, livelihood, family, health and future are threatened by persecution. But if hostility comes because we belong to Jesus, then He will give us confidence to see beyond the misery to the glory (2 Corinthians 12:10;

Revelation 2:10). Indeed, He commands us to rejoice – not because we enjoy ill-treatment but because we will receive the same reward as the prophets in the Bible.

Persecution is not new. It has been going on ever since Cain was jealous of his brother's righteousness and killed Abel (Matthew 23:34-35). It came to Jesus; and it will come to you at some point if you are a faithful witness. 2 Timothy 3:12 says, "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted ...". So the question is not 'will I be persecuted?' but 'how will I respond to persecution?' The command of Jesus is to rejoice, and be glad that you have been counted worthy of suffering for His Name (Acts 5:41) and that He will reward you. Strengthen your own heart in this and encourage others.

Prayer

Suffering Saviour. Thank You that You understand what it is like to be persecuted, violated and hated. I am sorry for the times when I have resented the bad attention I have received because of my faith in You. Please help me to learn how to look forward with joy, even in the most difficult circumstances, and encourage others to do the same - because I know that You will fully reward all who are unashamed of being a part of Your kingdom. For Your Name's sake. Amen.

Notes

Salt of the Earth

Matthew 5:13

'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. (NIVUK)

Salt was a highly valuable commodity in hot countries; it still is an essential mineral. It is life-sustaining and urgently needs to be replaced when it is lost in body sweat. It was so valuable and essential that salt was part of a Roman soldier's salary ... indeed, the word 'salary' comes from the Latin for salt: 'sal'. Salt was to be included with grain offerings (Leviticus 2:13) and was also used in cooking, cleaning, purification and preservation. It was important for wound healing, disinfecting toilet waste and preserving food such as fish and meat. And it is still highly effective for many of those purposes.

In those days, salt was either collected after the evaporation of salty water near the sea or mined as 'rock salt'. Both of these would have lots of other minerals in addition to sodium chloride (which is the refined active ingredient in salt). However, sodium chloride is the most soluble of all those minerals, and so if a pile of salt is exposed to moisture (dew, rain or flood) for any length of time, the potent sodium chloride dissolves out and cannot serve any function. Then it's only use is in mending roads.

The phrase 'salt of the earth' has become embedded into the English language. It now means 'a good person who is reliable, hardworking, kind and generous'. But that was not really what Jesus meant. Jesus said that the people in His kingdom would be like active, potent salt – able to make the world clean and preserve what is good. They would do that, not just by being good and hard-working, but by telling and living the gospel – exposing people to the truth and

grace of Christ. And they would be used by God all over the earth. However, if they fell away from the Lord Jesus and lost their confidence in the gospel, then they would be useless to His kingdom and people would walk all over them.

God's Kingdom is full of 'salt' – people who are very valuable to Him. They are potent with truth (Colossians 4:6); their presence can restrain wickedness and preserve what is true; they can clean what is filthy and add God's wholesome flavour to life. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, then your purpose is to be salt to bring out the best in the world around you for God's sake, and to stand against sinfulness. You are designed to preserve God's truth in a deceitful world and heal those who have been wounded by their own sin and the wickedness of others. So, live up to your calling. Do not let the world drain your potency for Jesus; and do not stagnate as a Christian allowing the goodness of Christ to leak away from you. Be potent salt for Jesus' sake.

Prayer

Wonderful Lord. Thank You for the privilege of being commissioned by You to go into a dirty world to announce the cleansing grace of Christ, and to be His representative to bless people whose lives have been traumatised by sin. Please forgive me for not realising that You have placed this responsibility on me, where I live and work. Please help me to be potent in the way I live and in the truth I say, so that others may see Your grace and desire to belong to You also. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

Light of the World

Matthew 5:14-16

'You are the light of the world. A town built 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 others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. (NIVUK)

God is light (1 John 1:5). That does not only mean that He has unlimited energy, but also that truth is His nature. Jesus described himself as 'the light of the world' (John 9:5) bringing God's truth into a swamp of lies and deception, self-interest and hatred. In these verses He told His disciples that they are the light of the world! Does that mean that they are God? No! But God's purpose is to share His nature and His mission with those who believe in Jesus (John 8:12), so that they can shine truth into a dark world (Philippians 2:14-16).

Jesus came to teach God's truth. Blind people were physically healed (Luke 7:22); that was a prophetic sign that God would enable His Word to be revealed to people trapped in darkness (Isaiah 29:18). But Jesus knew that He would soon place His mission, of announcing His saving grace to the world, in the hands of His disciples (Matthew 28:18-20). They needed to be ready to be outward-facing, truth-declaring messengers. They must not hide the truth from people but be bold and courageous to preach the gospel despite persecution (Matthew 24:9-14).

Light must be seen if it is to do its job. It is pointless to light a lamp and then shut it away. It must be set in a high place so that it cannot be obscured by other things. Jesus was saying that His disciples needed to be obvious like a fortified hilltop city. The light they had received was too valuable to be kept under cover.

Like John the Baptist, they were to be beacons of light to those who had lost their way (John 5:35).

Every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ is a light in the world. That is our spiritual responsibility. We are not here to make money, to enjoy ourselves, or to make a name for ourselves. We are here to shine out truth and love for God and His world. Like Jesus, we will find ourselves close to corruption in order to be God's agent of transformation. We will sing praise when others complain, work when others have given up, show compassion when nobody else cares and pray when everybody has given up hope. Above that, we will explain to lost people how they can find Jesus, telling the gospel to those who are crushed. It is not that we will be the light of the world; we already are. So get shining today!

Prayer

Light of the world. Thank You for commissioning me with the same responsibility that Jesus shared with His disciples and now binds me in common purpose with Your people all over the world. However I repent of failing to shine. I am sorry for hiding the light of the gospel through weakness or fear of what the dark world will say or think. Please help me to realise what You have done in me – lighting a beacon of hope for the world; and may I rejoice to proclaim the love and grace of Jesus which is the only solution to the darkness around me. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

Christ Fulfils God's Word

Matthew 5:17-18

'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. 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. (NIVUK)

Today's passage is Jesus' introduction to what God really meant in the Old Testament. The Law, although technically the first five books (Genesis to Deuteronomy), covered what God said was right and wrong; the Prophets told the kings and people to come back to God and how to please Him. God wanted people's hearts to be right – desiring what pleased Him and glad to obey Him (Psalm 51:10).

The purpose of the Law was to show people how different their lives were compared to the holy standard of God's righteousness. The seriousness of defying the Law was graphically emphasised, because an animal must die so that the people might live. But even the animal sacrifices could not make them right with God: only the sacrifice of Jesus could do that (Hebrews 10:1-4).

By His death, Jesus accepted all the punishment of the Law Himself, so that lawbreakers might be set free to worship God as holy people (Hebrews 10:5-14). In other words, by His death, Jesus enabled people to have a relationship with God ... fulfilling all the purposes of the Law and the Prophets. Not only did His sacrifice remove the curse of sin, but also brought the blessings promised in the Law so that all God's promises are completely fulfilled in Jesus (2 Corinthians 1:20).

The way forward in the Christian life is all to do with having a right heart before God. It is easy to follow little religious rules, but so difficult to whole-heartedly love the truth. We cannot achieve this by ourselves; we need the love of Father God to motivate us, the sacrifice of Jesus to cleanse us and the power of the Holy Spirit to energise us to live in wisdom, grace and truth. So, wise Christians admit their weakness, confess their sin, appeal for righteousness in their hearts and boldness to live in a way that pleases God. Where you are now is the ideal place to start practising this ... today!

Prayer

Holy God. Thank You for Your laws which show us how much we have failed You. Thank You too for the blood of Jesus Christ which atones for our sins. I am sorry when I have believed that keeping religious rules will make me right with You, when my heart is not right. Please help me to be honest with You about myself and give me confidence to appeal to Your grace for a new start and new power. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

God's Word Always Achieves its Purpose

Matthew 5:19-20

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 practises and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 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. (NIVUK)

Nothing that God says is ever wrong. There is a purpose behind every word, and the words stand until they have done their job. For example, sexuality and marriage is only for this earthly life: in heaven there will be no married or sexual relationships (Matthew 22:30), and so God's instructions about such relationships only last for this life. Likewise, all the laws designed to restrain sinful behaviour will be unnecessary in heaven which is a sin-free city!

Other instructions also had time limits. God's laws about animal sacrifices all looked forwards to Jesus being the ultimate sacrifice: after His death, no other sacrifice would ever be necessary (Hebrews 9:25-28). The rules which held Israel together as God's people (specific instructions about food, Sabbath, purification and land use) had done their job by the time that Gentiles who believed in Jesus were welcomed into His kingdom. The law was no longer needed but many of the principles behind those rules remain as godly wisdom.

It is those principles for righteous relationships, with other people and with God, which Jesus is going on to expose as He continued His Sermon on the Mount. He saw behind the act of murder to a heart of anger (Matthew 5:21-26); and behind the religious activities of prayer and fasting to a heart of pride (Matthew 6:5-18). And so, although Jesus appeared to be dismissing the significance of keeping a

religious rule, He was really emphasising the importance of having the right heart and being the right person before God.

It has become popular for some preachers to say that Biblical standards of morality and relationship do not matter anymore because our civilisations have become more enlightened. They are in error, because only Jesus knows when God's Word has done its job; nobody else has the right to declare God's Word fulfilled. Jesus explained to the trainee apostles the truth which they had to proclaim in the Last Days (the time up until His return). In the same way, we must also stay true to God's Word, living and speaking with gospel compassion and urgency. Many people would like us to change the message to make it suit the purpose of our society: we must not do that. God's Word is designed to achieve His salvation purposes in our lives and in our communities. Let us not change it, but love it, do it, share it and thank God for it.

Prayer

God of truth. Thank You for Your Word which will always be fulfilled. I am sorry when I have ignored parts of it to suit my own sinful nature and foolish desires. And I repent of ever encouraging anybody else to disobey Your Word. Please enable me to grow to love Your truth and share it with others, as I seek to obey what You have said each day. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

The Roots of Murder Exposed

Matthew 5:21-22

'You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, "You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment." But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, "Raca," is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, "You fool!" will be in danger of the fire of hell.

(NIVUK)

Murder is bad. Almost everybody agrees. But however an intentional killing might take place, it starts with wrong attitudes in the heart. Most of the time, those wrong passions do not produce a dead body; but God sees hateful desires as if they had already brought death (1 John 3:15). So Jesus said that there is no room for moral complacency or spiritual superiority when love is absent from relationships.

The sixth commandment is a stark negative – 'You shall not murder' (Exodus 20:13). It follows five commandments about how to relate with God and family; and it leads the five instructions about how to relate with 'neighbours'. Jesus gave a cascade of three attitudes which will eventually lead to murder, and must be repented of: anger, despising and detesting. Alarmingly, all of these mind-sets share a desire that the unwanted person should be out of your life ... in other words, treated as dead.

Jesus says that people who hate like that should be answerable to the local elders and then the national elders (the Sanhedrin). Those who would not abandon their hatred were in danger of the Gehenna of Fire. That was capital punishment by stoning followed by burning in the Valley of Hinnom (Jerusalem's perpetually burning rubbish dump). These were severe

punishments, but Jesus used the judicial system of the day as warnings because the final act of murder must be prevented.

While righteous anger has its place, the more we brood on it we easily personalise it. Instead of letting God take His action against sinners, we assume the right to hold anger in our hearts. Ephesians 4:26-27 says, "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." We have no right to take over God's responsibility of dealing with sinners (Romans 12:19): if we do, then we give Satan a foothold in our lives to undermine the grace of God's kingdom and the gospel message. Considering the seriousness with which Jesus would punish hatred in our hearts, surely we should repent, and then love our enemies and pray for those who treat us badly (Matthew 5:43-44). It is a very tough challenge, but we have no option.

Prayer

God of love. I am amazed how You continue to love those who hated You and deserved Your wrath. I am sorry for the ease with which I hold grudges, and dislike those who offend me. Please help me to love them and trust that You will deal with them righteously. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

From Broken Bonds to Restored Relationships

Matthew 5:23-26

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift. 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. Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny. (NIVUK)

Unsettled relationships will get in the way of worship. Can we say that we love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and strength, and yet not love our neighbour as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-40)? Will any gift of money or service make up for a failure to love? No! Jesus said, "To love Him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." (Mark 12:33).

So Jesus told His disciples that if they had sinned against others, they should not cover it up but seek to be reconciled through humble repentance (James 5:16). Not to just smile and pretend that everything is alright, but to ask for forgiveness and desire a restored relationship. In the meantime, they should leave their gift at the altar (not to withdraw it but wait to present it in holiness). After the human relationships are restored, God will be pleased with the gift.

Reconciliation should be a priority wherever possible. There is an optimal time window for reconciliation. After that it becomes harder to achieve, or even impossible. However, our offence is not just against our brother or sister, but

also against the law of God (Psalm 51:3-4). Therefore it is foolish to delay repentance, or to assume that the offence will be lost in the mists of time. If it is important to resolve boundary disputes quickly before they become a matter for the civil courts, how much more should we deal with unsettled relationships before God needs to exercise His hand of judgement.

Human relationships easily break. Sin naturally invades our families, churches and communities; it finds a weak place in our spiritual defences and then establishes its rule. As it does so, families are fractured, friendships are frayed, and love is lost. The kingdom of heaven is a very different kind of society: one where rights are secondary to relationships; a place where love rules. We cannot separate our relationships with God from the way we relate with other people. So, it is good to review the way in which we interact with other people; ask the Lord to highlight those broken bonds which He wants to heal and ask Him to provide the grace and opportunities to do so. Then we will be able to serve Him with a fresh heart and know His joy.

Prayer

Gracious God. Thank You for the way in which You have opened a way for me to get right with You, through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. I am sorry when I have not seen the importance of restoring broken relationships, and have failed to take the opportunities to repent, or receive the genuine repentance of others. Please help me to see the opportunities You provide to enable righteousness to flow, and fellowship to be restored. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

The Fruits of Lust

Matthew 5:27-30

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

Adultery is wrong, as wrong as greed, hatred and breaking promises (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). But it has an even greater relationship-breaking effect. The Bible teaches that sex is designed to be expressed in marriage (Genesis 1:27-28) as a means of expressing love and producing children. Any other expression of sexual desire will displease God, hurt others and shame our own consciences (1 Corinthians 6:18). That was all written in the Old Testament law. However, in these verses, Jesus did not only support God's ancient commandments, He made them even more practical.

Fear, lack of opportunity and an internal moral sense of wrongness will keep many people from the act of adultery; but that is no reason for moral smugness. Jesus said that lust is just as bad. Indeed, it is so bad that radical measures need to be taken to prevent the cascade from lust to disaster (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8). The heart is naturally lustful, but if that desire is starved, it has little power. However, if it is fed through what the eyes see, and what the hands touch - then lust can easily become a raging inferno which can overwhelm the strongest of mental resolutions. So, Jesus sees the wrong passion as equal to the wrong action. And, in a way, it is more important to deal with before a wrong action is taken which cannot be undone.

Is the treatment for this problem to cut off a hand or gouge out an eye? No. Jesus is not advocating self-mutilation (there is no benefit in self-harming in an attempt to purify the soul). He is making a big point in a highly graphic way - even if we feel it is repulsive. He is saying that temptation needs to be dealt with at its source. If looking at a person you are not married to fans the flames of wrongful passion, then don't look. If touching excites wrong passion, then don't touch. If you are married, do not deprive each other (1 Corinthians 7:1-5). If you are not married but are free to marry (and the other person is also a believer), then get married lest the passions destroy your integrity (1 Corinthians 7:8-9).

This is strong talking from Jesus; but it is necessary in every age and especially our own. Spiritual disciplines of prayer, Bible reading and fellowship must be matched by practical disciplines. We need to decide what we will not watch and what we will not touch. It is a matter of the heart to agree with Jesus that His principle is right. It is a matter of the heart to love Him so much that we choose what to see and handle. Decisions are made in the heart about what will build us (and others) up instead of dragging us down. Parents need not be shy in talking with children and teenagers; youth leaders should not be afraid to be clear and practical. Church pastors must not shy away from such teaching. And we all need to encourage each other to do it.

Prayer

Holy Father. Thank You for the gift of sex and the joy of right relationships. Thank You for the Bible that teaches me the importance of dealing with lustful temptations. I am sorry when I have minimised the importance of Jesus' teaching, been careless about my disciplines and have not curbed lust at its source. Please forgive me and help me to build a lifestyle full of Godly integrity which will glorify You, bless others and bring joy to my own heart. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

The Fruits of Lovelessness

Matthew 5:31-32

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 sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (NIVUK)

There are no winners in divorce. Marriage breakdown is always a painful business, often after a long process of eroded trust and the distance created by infidelity. What once seemed bright is now dark: love has gone. The Old Testament law given through Moses recognised that there may come a point where a married couple were unwilling or unable to restore the relationship, and that divorce was the only way ahead (Deuteronomy 24:1).

However, that law was embellished by religious leaders - giving a husband the opportunity to divorce his wife for trivial reasons, as the Pharisees identified (Matthew 19:3-9). The certificate of divorce seemed to be a licence for the husband to relieve himself of any responsibility towards his wife. Of course, adultery is the serious marriage-breaker and in that case if the couple cannot forgive and rebuild trust, then divorce provides a way out of unbearable pain.

But, Jesus said, the consequence of a 'divorce of convenience' will ripple on into another marriage. The 'one flesh' principle (Genesis 2:24; Mark 10:4-12) remains in God's eyes and is embedded into our consciences. Therefore Jesus said that remarriage becomes an adulterous offence against the first marriage. Jesus was also using this practical example to demonstrate the lasting nature of love in His kingdom, which is also the model for human relationships (Ephesians 5:25-27).

In God's kingdom, love is the essence of relationship. It is about giving and reconciling in order to build relationships which express the mutual love of the Father with the Son and the Spirit. Love does not expose others to harm or put them in danger of offending God. It is not so much a feeling, as a covenant commitment to seek the best for the other (1 Corinthians 13:4-7) and to work through the difficulties to secure what is best. The tragic pain of dysfunctional human relationships can lead us to accept less than the best; that is why we need the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 13:14) to help us to attain God's best in a sin-riddled world.

Prayer

Loving God. Thank You for Your unending love towards me. I am sorry when my love for others is so fragile and when I give up on loving, especially when that will make others spiritually vulnerable. Please help me to grow in the practice of committed love, drawing on Your grace to support me through the difficult times. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

Truth in a World of Lies

Matthew 5:33-37

Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, "Do not break your oath, but fulfil to the Lord the oaths you have made." But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it 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. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. All you need to say is simply "Yes," or "No"; anything beyond this comes from the evil one. (NIVUK)

If there were no lies, there would be no need for oaths. But there are many lies, so how can we tell who is telling the truth? In every culture, oaths are solemn vows which bring a curse on the person who breaks them. The idea is that the bigger the authority you put yourself under, the more reliable the statement must be. So people might swear an oath by heaven, implying that heaven would have the right to judge if it was not the truth.

Jesus certainly wanted people to do what they had promised; but He questioned their need to make any oath. Every word spoken is heard by God, and He will always be the judge. So there is no need to validate what you say by swearing on anything. In God's kingdom, truth is always the currency of communication. So, in heaven, nobody needs to convince anybody that they are telling the truth – because they never tell lies. Swearing is redundant for that reason too.

Swearing often becomes a thoughtless way of emphasising a point – but why, if you are telling the truth? Again it is redundant. But many people simply get into the habit of swearing and do not know they are doing it. It is a bad habit which broadcasts to everybody that you need to affirm that something is true because

you often lie! There is no need for God's children to say anything more than 'yes' and 'no' (James 5:12). To swear, is to allow Satan to manipulate you. Strong language - but true.

What we say speaks volumes about us. Swearing may be a habit, but it is a bad habit. It needs to be broken by choosing to practise truth and, over time, get other people used to accepting that because we always speak the truth we will always be true witnesses and faithful promisors. That is important; because when we speak about Jesus, He wants everybody to know that the gospel is true and that salvation by grace through faith is certain. At an everyday level, if our lives are submitted to Jesus (who is the Truth), speaking the truth will validate our faith. Alas, the world of work is full of lies and half-truths ... the Evil One is at work in the office and school, the factory and university encouraging a web of lies so that nobody can trust anybody. It is the route to misery. Christian: be truthful, whatever the consequences!

Prayer

God of Truth. Thank You for always keeping Your promises and for welcoming me into Your kingdom when I trusted in the truth of the gospel. I am sorry for the times when I have fallen to Satan's temptation to lie in order to make myself look bigger. I am sorry when I have sworn to affirm that my words are true – thereby demonstrating that my other words are not. I repent of such habits. Please help me to agree with the truth and live the truth and speak the truth, always. May my mouth be worthy of Your sacrifice for me. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

Release from Revenge

Matthew 5:38-42

You have heard that it was said, "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth." 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. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. (NIVUK)

Justice is good; but revenge is bad. The Old Testament law enabled justice to be done in a proportional way: a murderer would lose his own life, and the one who knocked out somebody else's tooth would lose his own. It was good for public order and kept crime to a minimum. But there was no way to modify the punishment or even forgive the offender. There was no mercy and no grace.

When Jesus announced the kingdom of heaven, He presented a very different kind of justice. The problem with the old law was not only that it could not forgive, but also that it did not go far enough. To be truly proportional, every single sin, including wrong words and thoughts, should be punished. But the law only addressed obvious crimes which had an immediate social effect. However, to punish every sinner would have put everybody in jeopardy, because all have sinned (Romans 3:23). Jesus' kingdom was based on the fact that He would 'become sin' for every person (2 Corinthians 5:21) and be punished instead of them, so that all who believe in Him should not perish in judgement but have everlasting life (John 3:16).

If such grace and mercy is available from God, how should victims treat the people who hurt them? Not by taking revenge, because vengeance is only safe in God's hands! Romans 12:19-21 says, "Do not take revenge, my dear friends,

but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay', says the Lord. On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." The kindness of people, who have received grace, gives room for other sinners to repent. God takes no pleasure in judgement but longs that all will come to repentance and live in His kingdom (Ezekiel 18:23).

Practically, it is a challenge. Naturally, we often want revenge, and we resist being merciful or gracious. But, with the Spirit's help, we can and must be different. If God has been so patient with us, how can we be so quick to be angry with others? Jesus has given His life for sinners - should we not lay down ours for others (1 John 3:16)? No sinner deserves mercy or grace; it is given to undeserving people. That is the nature of Christ's sacrifice and the essential quality of His kingdom. Let us show that we are God's citizens: let us identify a person who has offended us and choose to be gracious to them for Christ's sake. It is the normal way to live as a Christian.

Prayer

God of all grace. Thank You that Jesus Christ took all my sin so that You could give me Your mercy; and more than that, to give me blessing I could never deserve. I am sorry for the times when I have sought revenge instead of being gracious and giving them time to repent. Please help me to understand Your amazing patience with me so that I will show mercy to those who have offended me, and take opportunities to bless them. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

From Hate to Love

Matthew 5:43-48

You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 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. 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 own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (NIVUK)

Enemies are hostile; they seek to take what does not belong to them, attacking people and property to gain power over them. Naturally, we hate our enemies and want bad things to happen to them (Psalm 139:19-22). But Jesus pointed out that God sends sun and rain indiscriminately to good and bad alike, enabling their crops to grow so that they can all eat and live. In this way He shows His love to the wicked as well as to the righteous (Luke 6:35).

The kingdom of heaven is full of people who have been wicked once, but they have been transformed when they believed the gospel and received the Spirit of Christ (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). Each of them might have been annihilated for their sins; but God had mercy on them when they repented and put their trust in Jesus. That was the Apostle Paul's testimony (1 Timothy 1:13-16). The only way His kingdom will grow is by evil people hearing the gospel, repenting and being born again (Acts 2:38). Jesus has a special interest in winning them because He loves them.

In part, He uses the love of those who already believe in Him. As we see how much sinners need Him as their Saviour, we stop hating them and treat them as

people who are spiritually sick. We pray for them and bless them with kindness so that they will see practical love from us, which comes from our Heavenly Father. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 4:12-13: "We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly..." The work of the gospel enables God's enemies to be reconciled with Him through Christ; but in the process, they will hate us for our efforts.

Being nice to those who think well of us, is easy (Luke 6:26). It is hard to love our enemies. Yet Jesus did. 1 Peter 2:20-23 says, "...But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ... When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly." It is the perfect standard which is impossible except through the love of God. And when we know that love, we must share it – so that sinners will find a road of love drawing them towards the Saviour. The first step is to pray for them. Let us ask His help to take that first step.

Prayer

Heavenly Father. Thank You for Your love which has drawn me to Yourself. I am sorry when I have failed to understand the importance of displaying that love to those who are hostile towards me. Please forgive me and give me a desire to pray for those who are hostile towards me. Help me to learn to thank You for Your undeserved love to me, so that I may learn to show undeserved love to my enemies. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

Hypocritical or Secret Giving

Matthew 6:1-4

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

It is good to give. But the motive for our giving will determine God's response to our generosity. Religious people in Jesus' time often liked to be seen as generous patrons of the poor. They made their gifts obvious for all to see – not just the poor beggar who received the money, but their own peers and disciples too. Their charity became a matter of elevating their social status; and the giver was rewarded by the respect of the crowd (Matthew 23:5-7).

Jesus called them 'actors'. The Greek word for 'actor' is hypocrite. They were on a 'stage' playing to the applause of the audience. They were religious performers: not sincere towards God because their heart was set on making themselves look important, gaining glory from other people. Jesus said that they had already received their reward. They put on a good show for the onlookers to win popular approval. Their motive was not obedience towards God (Deuteronomy 15:7), or love for the poor, but self-centred personal ambition to be praised.

Giving which pleases God, is nobody else's business. It is a private transaction known only to God, a secret between Him and the giver. So, although we may

give to the poor, we are really giving to the Lord ... it is as though He is giving generously, and we provide the courier service. After all, everything we have comes from God and we hold it in trust for Him (1 Chronicles 29:14), and then we look to Him to direct how it is to be used to achieve His purposes. We are not the real benefactors ... it is all from God and He should have the glory. When we grab the limelight and bow before our admirers, we are stealing the praise which really belongs to God. So we cannot expect any divine reward.

God cherishes the love we express to Him as we make secret gifts to others for His sake. He loves the way in which we pour out our devotion to Him by passing on some of the material blessings He has given to us. It is part of the way His kingdom works. And He will reward those who work with Him to provide for those in need, so that He gets the glory. Start by asking Him who He wants you to give to; then ask Him what He wants you to give. Then find a way to give so that you do not attract any attention to yourself; and make your gift and praise God for the privilege of being His courier of blessing. Keep it quiet and let God do the rest.

Prayer

Father God. Thank You for giving me so much to share with other people who You want to bless. I repent of drawing attention to my giving so that people may think well of me. Please help me to learn how to plan my giving with You and give without other people knowing, so that You get the glory. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

Hypocritical or Relational Praying

Matthew 6:5-8

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

It is very good to pray (Luke 18:1). Praying is an essential part of relating to God ... it simply means to 'cry out' to Him. We cry out to God because we are not big enough, clever enough or godly enough to meet life's problems or to discipline our own lives. When we see the awesome interventions of God, we cry out in amazement. But when we pray, we also need God's help to praise Him, repent, thank Him and intercede for others (Romans 8:26-27). Compared with God, we are weak in every way.

However some religious people like to make a show of prayer (Mark 12:38-40). They are like actors on a stage - they make others believe that they are more holy than they are. It was a problem in Jesus' day when prayer was accompanied by kneeling, bowing, standing with hands raised; even weeping as they prayed in public. Some would also babble aloud and make a lot of noise. But none of that impressed Jesus. He said that God only welcomed sincere heartfelt silent prayer – in fact, any public demonstration could be a snare, tempting the pray-er to seek human approval. Jesus said that if people prayed to gain applause from others, that would be the only reward they could get.

The Lord does not look at our body movements or measure our decibels. He only looks at the heart (1 Samuel 16:7). Jesus said that prayer is a very personal communication which is ruined if we try to use it as a way of advertising our pride (dressed up as piety) to others. And constant repetition of words is senseless too; that does not make God listen better or act faster (Ecclesiastes 5:1-3). Jesus' simple instruction was to pray in secret. The 'secret place' is where we do business with God, honestly and with no pretence (2 Kings 4:33). There is no other reason for praying, other than to relate with our Maker, trusting that He will respond.

Of course, God knows everything; He knows what we need before we pray (Psalm 139:4). So, some say, why bother to tell Him anything? Because prayer is a part of the way we relate with Him. How can we say we have a relationship with God if we do not speak to Him? But that relationship must be honest, 'looking God in the eye'. Our conversation with Him must be single-minded, addressed to Him alone. Hypocrisy only proves that we care little about Him, and He knows. The secret is to be private and personal with God, setting aside undivided time and people-free space. It is a discipline, which will become a joy.

Prayer

Heavenly Father. Thank You for wanting me to talk to You. It is a great privilege but one which I have abused by using prayer to impress other people, or by repeating prayers over and over as though the number of words I say will influence Your decision to answer me. Please help me to learn the discipline of secret prayer, just between me and You - in a place where I can be free from distractions and share my heart honestly with You. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

The Lord's Prayer

Matthew 6:9-15

'This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (NIVUK)

True prayer honours the Lord more than the pray-er. Jesus commenced this 'pattern prayer' by honouring Father God. He is the source of all life, and He is unchangeable; He is the founder of His Kingdom, which is eternal; and the Commander of the Universe, to whom everybody is accountable. He is the Provider of every necessity, the Forgiver for every sin, the Defender against temptation and the Deliverer from Satan.

The Father's Name is the essence of His character and the sum of all His actions. It is holy, sacred and totally different from the weak, imperfect personalities of human beings. He is always right, always true, always faithful and never corrupted. His Name is therefore to be held in the highest honour, revered and hallowed ([Deuteronomy 18:20](#)). That is why we must obey Him and work with Him in such a way that other human beings will also desire to belong to Him. One day, His kingdom will be seen in all its power and glory ([Mark 13:26](#)), and we will see what heaven is like.

But until then, we rely on Him for everything - because He is the ultimate provider ([1 Chronicles 29:14](#)). He is the source of all good gifts and the only one who can forgive our sins ([Mark 2:7](#)). In turn, He expects us to forgive those

people who have sinned against us. If we do not do so, we leave ourselves open to Satan's power ([Ephesians 4:26-27](#)). Ultimately, the Lord will subdue Satan ([Romans 16:20](#)) as we are obedient to the Father's commands.

This prayer, often called 'The Lord's Prayer', is a pattern to help believers to relate with their Heavenly Father. It is not wrong to pray it all the way through as a prayer, but it was never intended to be the only prayer we should pray. It is a template for our praying, desiring God's glory first and our needs second. We should recognise that His kingdom is much wider than our own circumstances; and yet we fit into His kingdom as we submit to Him, knowing that our needs will be met, and sins forgiven. Satan's power is only held back by God's power, and we are right to declare that truth and rely on our heavenly Father to protect us.

Prayer

Father God. Thank You for this reminder that although You are so holy, pure and righteous, You welcome sinners like me to speak to You. Thank You for Your wonderful character and perfect actions which assure me that every time I approach You, You will do the right thing. Forgive me for being slow to ask for forgiveness, and even slower to forgive others. Please help me to pray, sincerely recognising who You are, being honest about my own needs and having a clean heart in which the devil has no foothold. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

Fasting in Faith

Matthew 6:16-18

'When you fast, do not look sombre 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. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 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. (NIVUK)

After His extended teaching on prayer (Matthew 6:5-15), Jesus turned to another way in which some religious people had become actors (hypocrites); not people of real faith. Like prayer, fasting is another private spiritual discipline. It is a way of expressing the relationship between the believer and God. It should never be a play-act for the sake of those who we seek to impress with our spirituality.

And yet in Jesus' day, everybody knew who was fasting; they looked dreadful, their hair was bedraggled, their faces were smeared with dirt, and they paraded themselves publicly to draw attention to their own 'holiness'. Jesus said that they would have no recognition from God because they had attracted applause from other people (Matthew 6:2; Matthew 6:5).

The combination of prayer with fasting is a helpful way to focus on God; and avoids all the distractions associated with buying, preparing, cooking, eating and cleaning up the food (and the sleepy feeling afterwards!). Jesus expected that worshippers would fast from time to time; but said that they should preserve it as a secret between them and God. So, their appearance should be normal and joyful instead of unkempt and doleful. There is no need for anybody else to know.

God sees into every secret place and knows every secret (Matthew 6:4; Matthew 6:6). He knows those who give themselves to the work of prayer and those who play at it. He rewards those who fully commit themselves to seeking His face in this life and the next (Matthew 6:33). We cannot determine the reward: it is entirely in God's hand to give it to us; it is the product of His grace and our faithfulness. Prayer with fasting is still a very helpful discipline, especially at times when we need to know the Lord's will or seek His interventions in some matter. But don't forget that it is secret business between you and your God. Now that we know how He wants us to do it, let us obey.

Prayer

Dear Lord God. Thank You for spiritual disciplines such as fasting which enable us to focus on meeting with You away from distractions. Forgive me when I have used any spiritual discipline to draw other people's attention towards myself. Please help me to value the 'secret place' where I can be transparently honest with You without losing Your approval. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

Treasure that Cannot be Taken Away

Matthew 6:19-21

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

We treasure whatever is valuable to us; but whatever we hold preciously can soon be taken away. Thieves can steal them, water can rust them, small animals and insects can eat them. Even a bank may not protect the value of our money. Wherever we put our valuables they become a liability, a source of anxiety. Although we hope they will give us security, the moment we have them we feel a little insecure.

That is the nature of this world. It is temporary: we cannot trust anything to be permanent. One day it will pass away and before then: we will too (1 John 2:17). However, that does not mean that we should not plant and reap crops, manufacture and sell goods, and market services. Although they are temporary, they have the everyday function of feeding ourselves and our families (Jeremiah 29:4-7). But we cannot keep any of our assets for ever (Haggai 1:6). They are designed to be used because they cannot be stored indefinitely. Indeed, whatever we do for ourselves will ultimately be a disappointment; and even if we succeed for a while, either our riches will leave us or we will leave them (Luke 12:16-21). In addition, the love of wealth is a great evil distracting us from serving our God (1 Timothy 6:10).

Jesus said that heaven is full of treasures which can never spoil or fade. He did not mean gold or Olympic medals, but the fruit of our loving relationship with

God. He honours people who love and serve Him, and keeps all His rewards in heaven as part of our inheritance in heaven (1 Peter 1:3-6). We cannot take it with us, but it will be waiting for us. That is why Jesus rebuked the religious leaders who sought praise from people for their giving, praying and fasting. He said they have already had their reward on earth, and there will be no reward in heaven (Matthew 6:1; Matthew 6:5; Matthew 6:16). The problem was not in their actions but in the motives of their hearts - they wanted to please human beings rather than please God.

The things we treasure are easy to identify. They are found wherever we spend our time, thoughts, money and energy. So where does pleasing God and serving Him come in the priority list? C.T. Studd, the British cricketer and missionary to China, India and Africa, wrote a poem with the refrain, "Only one life, 'twill soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last." He was right, and as a consequence, his life was amazingly fruitful for God's kingdom. What about yours?

Prayer

Loving Father. Thank You for giving to me all that I need so that You can use me, and all that I hold in trust for You, to bless others for Christ's sake. Forgive me for the selfish attitude of thinking that all I have is mine to be used for my pleasure. Forgive me for storing up treasure for myself on earth and forgetting that I should be producing fruit for Your glory, which You will reward one day. Please help me to think of what you have given to me as tools and not toys, so that I will use them well in a way which will bless others and bring praise to You. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

Illuminating the Soul

Matthew 6:22-23

'The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. 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!

(NIVUK)

The eye receives light from outside and transmits its message inside the person. Jesus said that the eye is like a lamp which shines inwards, and the heart is illuminated by what the eye sees (Luke 11:34). Unhealthy eyes cannot do that. Blind people cannot see where they are or the way ahead. Blurred vision distorts the image and confuses the mind.

But Jesus was using this picture to illustrate spiritual perception. We use the expression, 'I see' to mean, 'I understand'. If we are perceiving truth, then our souls will be free to embrace it and walk in it. If we choose to ignore the truth, then there is no way we can navigate through life and reach eternity safely. The more we block out truth, the deeper our confusion about God and how to live for Him (John 9:40-41).

There is another meaning here too. The Greek word for 'healthy' also means 'generous', and 'unhealthy' means 'miserly'. Those whose 'eye' is on getting wealth will develop a dark heart, whereas those who love to give to others will have a lightness of heart. That meaning fits well with the preceding verses about storing up treasure for yourselves (Matthew 6:19-21), and with the following verses about not being able to serve both God and money (Matthew 6:24).

So what fills your soul? Light from God and a desire to live in His love, or the darkness of the world? A lust for wealth, or a love of giving? What we look for shows the state of our hearts. The Lord Jesus wants us to desire what He loves and to focus on what will bless us (Philippians 4:8-9) and to enjoy sharing His truth and material blessings. It is a challenge to be faced today.

Prayer

Holy Father. Thank You that Your truth makes everything clear. I am sorry when I have preferred lies and desired things that will never please You. Please help me to be more aware of the need to live in Your light every day. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

Faithful to your Master?

Matthew 6:24

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. (NIVUK)

Working as an employee demands loyalty and obedience to the boss. Serving two managers at the same time is confusing at best, and disastrous at worst. Although many people do more than one job, there is always the risk of preferring one boss to another and grumbling. Jesus said that true, wholehearted, loyal, devoted service is not just a matter of doing a job well; it is a personal commitment to serve as though we were working for our Heavenly Master, whatever the cost (Colossians 3:23).

That is true enough in the workplace, but in God's kingdom, there is only one valid boss. All the others are imposters. When Satan, the world or the flesh demand a different agenda, it is because they hate the Lord and hate all that He is doing. Their only power is to seduce God's workforce to obey them instead of Him. Along the way Satan spins a web of lies, trapping the undiscerning believer into rebelling against God, hating His agenda, criticising His methods and despising His discipline (Hebrews 12:5). And many are spiritually derailed; especially when money starts dictating the agenda (1 Timothy 6:10).

The wise disciple of Jesus will recognise the danger of money. It has its own seductive power causing otherwise rational people to do whatever is necessary to increase their wealth. Often Christ spoke about giving instead of getting; and sharing rather than keeping. But the love of money is a root of many kinds of evil: theft, murder, lying, fraud and broken promises (1 Timothy 6:10). The love of money brings people to allow late payment for goods and services, false

accounting, unnecessary cost-cutting, redundancies and dismissals in order to make the business or individual look good. None of that is serving Jesus.

The first step in taking a different path through life is to recognise the current dangers and past failures. Then, to repent of claiming to serve Jesus, while actually despising Him. There is no reconciliation without repentance. We must never forget that we are created by God, sustained by God and accountable to God. He is our master because He has bought us with the precious blood of Christ. No other authority has the right to command our obedience, least of all money.

Prayer

Ruler of all. Thank You for this reminder that You have the total right to command my obedience and loyalty. I am sorry for the times when I have been pulled away from serving You; instead I have criticised or despised You while following other adventures, especially with money. Please forgive me and give me a pure heart. Teach me to be eager to serve You, refusing to listen to any other authority. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

Do not Worry

Matthew 6:25-27

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? 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? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? (NIVUK)

Fear comes to every sinner - because fear is our response to the prospect of punishment (1 John 4:18). It is therefore natural to be afraid - which we most commonly exhibit as worry. We worry when we are not able to control our own circumstances to our advantage; when we are uncertain about our future and fear the consequences of past bad decisions; and when we allow Satan to tempt us away from our security in Christ.

Jesus said that we should not worry. In these verses He gives five reasons. Firstly, that the life we have today is real: as real as our bodies are alive today. Live one day at a time and live it to the full, refusing to stop investing in its opportunities by worrying about tomorrow (Matthew 6:34). Secondly, that God provides everything we need (Philippians 4:19). If He provides for the birds, will He not provide for His people (Luke 12:7)? Thirdly, that we have a Heavenly Father who has taken the responsibility to give all that is needed to His children (Matthew 7:9-11). Fourthly, that we are the most valuable part of God's creation and so God will not forget about any one of us (Isaiah 49:15). Fifthly, that absolutely nothing can be achieved by worrying, it only disables us (Philippians 4:4-7).

So although fear and worry are the endemic soul-diseases of sinful humanity, Jesus commands a different mindset. He instructs us to change the habits of a lifetime and to reject the lies of Satan - who tells us that if we try harder, we can control our destiny. So, why do we still worry? Perhaps the answer lies in the security offered by our heavenly Father. If we do not believe that we are special to Him and that He pledges Himself to supply all our needs, then we will worry.

The problem is that we do not believe that we are loved, provided for and protected by God ("There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear ..." 1 John 4:18). So the first step forward is to repent of our unbelief. The second is to accept that we are loved, not because of our good character but because Jesus has been punished for everything which has contributed to our bad character, and so we can be forgiven and accepted. We will need the help of God's Word and His Spirit to assure us that we are loved, despite what we might feel. We will need to learn to draw near to God and learn to accept His love, at the same time as we resist the devil until he flees from us (James 4:7). Worry is a symptom of unbelief. As we stop worrying, our family and work colleagues will notice that we are much more confident and less controlling; then we can explain that we are trusting Jesus.

Prayer

Loving Father. Thank You for providing everything I need when I need it. I am sorry for worrying and for the underlying unbelief in my heart. Please help me to grow in confidence that I am accepted because of Christ's sacrifice for me, and help me to learn to enjoy living in Your grace each day. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

Small-Faith Worriers

Matthew 6:28-32

And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. 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? So do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. (NIVUK)

Clothes are important. They cover us up, and make us warm and socially attractive. But clothes can also be expensive. The fashion industry is big business worldwide, but very poor people can hardly afford the most modest of styles and fabrics. However, God knows that we need clothes - after all He killed and skinned animals to clothe Adam and Eve to hide their shame and nakedness (Genesis 3:21).

But Jesus said that God still makes beautiful clothing. The flowers are so skilfully dressed by God's design without having to pay for their fashion accessories. Although they are exquisitely attractive, those flowers have a short life-span and end up as dead blooms on the bonfire (Psalm 103:15-18). In one way it seems a waste, but they are an object-lesson from God. If He lavishes such beauty on flowers which live for weeks, days or even hours, will He not provide for His people who He loves? (Philippians 4:19)

That is why unbelievers are obsessed with getting enough of these daily commodities: because they have no living relationship with God, they do not trust Him to provide for them. When we worry about not having enough to wear

or eat, we do not believe that God's love for us includes His provision for our needs. We may say we believe, but our worry demonstrates that there is a gap between knowing that our Heavenly Father fully understands our situation, and cares about our needs, and trusting Him to supply them. The gap comes when we do not seek His kingdom first (Matthew 6:33).

Our human needs are God's opportunities for us to grow in faith. But Satan uses them as his opportunity to sow doubt into our minds and stir up worry so that we despair. The challenge is to believe that God will provide, and to resist the doubts and worries. It should drive us back to the Bible's description of the character of God: loving, protecting, guiding and providing - which Jesus underlines in these verses. Trusting is only possible as we understand what God is like from the Bible, encouraged by the experience of His people and our own interactions with Him. Moving from small faith to large faith depends on being certain of who He is and that He rewards those who seek Him (Hebrews 11:6).

Prayer

Provider God. Thank You for Your love, and all the blessings which flow from Your grace. Forgive me for worrying because I have failed to trust You. And forgive me for not getting to know You better through the Scriptures so that I have been unprepared for the tests of faith. Please help me to develop a much greater confidence in your desire and power to supply my needs, and teach me how to resist the urge to worry, because You are in command of all Your resources. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

Seek First His Kingdom

Matthew 6:33-34

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. (NIVUK)

Jesus had been exposing the foolishness of worrying (Matthew 6:25-32). He said that worry cannot change anything; it cannot extend your life; and it demonstrates your lack of faith, showing that you do not trust Your Heavenly Father to provide for His children. Worry is a part of the normal pagan mind-set, which excludes the care of a loving God and assumes that human effort alone will achieve the answer to every problem.

Worry points to the inadequacy of self or the uncertainty of any help from outside. The worrying person tries hard to fix everything and yet despair, and not hope, is the default endpoint. Jesus said that instead of striving to arrange the future, we should trust that God has already arranged the future for His people in His kingdom (Jeremiah 29:11). It is in seeking the welfare of His kingdom, not ours, that we will find our own rest (Psalm 62:5). But what does that mean? Can we somehow by our efforts create heaven? No! Of course not!

Jesus meant that if our hearts desire is for His will to be done, and if we contribute to that by obeying what He says (that is practical righteousness - doing what is right), then the Lord will provide for our needs: food, drink, clothes and all necessary material possessions (Philippians 4:19). That does not mean that He will give us all we demand or deliver according to our timetable; but He will give what is necessary in just the right way and in time.

Worry is always about the uncertainty and insecurity of the future (or the future consequences of the past). Until Jesus comes back there will always be a 'tomorrow'; we do not know its details nor demands, but He does. So, let Him look after every 'tomorrow'. Our job is to do what is right today; and pray that His will is done and His kingdom will grow today and tomorrow. Worry can so easily become a habit, but it is not a godly habit. We should repent of such unrighteousness and ask the Lord to help us to trust that He does know what He is doing, and that He will do it well ... for us, for our family and friends and for the building of His kingdom.

Prayer

Almighty God. Thank You for being the God who knows all things and who alone has the power to bring all things under Your control. I repent of my habit of worrying. Forgive my faithless fear and help me to see things from the perspective of Your sovereign authority. Help me to focus my attention on doing what is right today and leaving You to manage tomorrow. May I seek Your kingdom first and welcome every provision You give to me. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

The Critical Eye

Matthew 7:1-5

'Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way as you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. 'Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? 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. (NIVUK)

When we look at others, we see people who are not perfect. Only God is perfect. The more we see of God, the greater the beauty of His holiness. But the more we look at other people, their sinful nature becomes more evident (Romans 3:23). And so we criticise those around us. It may make us feel superior and give us feelings of power over people, like the Pharisees of Jesus' day (Luke 18:9-14).

Such criticism can so easily become a habit; but we need to know it is an ungodly habit - for two reasons. Firstly, because we can never judge as accurately as God; we do not know the depths of anybody else's heart. And secondly, because we have our own faults. Our own wrong patterns of thought, speech and behaviour may seem normal to us because that is how we usually behave - and we do not even see that they are wrong. In fact, the sin in our own lives blinds us to what we are really like, even though we think we can clearly see the faults of others (John 9:40-41).

A blind critical eye is useless to us, and it is dangerous if we try to take a speck out of another person's eye. But worse than that for us, is the all-seeing eye of God (Genesis 16:13). He never judges wrongly (Psalm 75:6). He always sees where the fault lies and knows how to show hypocrites the foolishness of their

own behaviour, calling them to repent before He has to take action to protect His Name (Revelation 2:5).

Criticism within the family, and especially within the family of God, is dangerous and divisive. It will wound a brother or sister and hurt our Father's heart. It will not achieve anything that we desire, but will bring God's judgement down on us. These high-sounding critics are really hypocrites (play-actors) who use the stage of life to persuade people to applaud them as the 'goodies' and boo the 'baddies'. That is a pantomime act which is far too common in churches. It is time to repent.

Prayer

God of truth and mercy. Thank You for forgiving me all my sins. I am ashamed to realise that I hold myself as a judge over other people when I criticise them. I do not know them completely, their struggles or their prayers as they may be learning how to follow Jesus. But You do know them; You are full of truth and mercy and You always judge rightly. Please help me to stop being a hypocrite, and may I learn humility as I seek Your assessment of my life. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

Discerning those who are Hungry for the Lord

Matthew 7:6

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.

(NIVUK)

Although some cultures have trained domesticated dogs to become expensive family pets which enjoy the run of the house, they are still dogs. All dogs, whatever their breed and however cute, affectionate or obedient, are derived from the, now extinct, Grey Wolf. Under the right conditions even home-bred dogs will start to show some wolf-like characteristics, especially when they are very hungry. But all over the world, most dogs have no human kindness or domestic home: they will eat whatever they can find.

In Jesus' day, the stray dogs did not discriminate: they ate whatever they could find. Jesus used their behaviour to teach His disciples to be careful with holy things. Dogs would have no holy thoughts about the spotless sheep and cattle which had been sacrificed in the temple – only meat unfit for sacrifice was given to dogs ([Exodus 22:31](#)). They would hungrily devour the meat with no thought of its holy purpose. In the same way, worldly people do not appreciate the value of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, who had been sacrificed for the sin of the world. The world has no care for the gospel as long as they can satisfy themselves and think they can manipulate God into giving them what they want ([Acts 8:18-23](#)).

Likewise, pigs have no understanding about fine jewellery. If precious pearls are on the ground, they will be trampled into the ground by the animals. If you stand in their way they may trample you too. Ravenous dogs, if they are unable to find any other food will even attack a live human being, as wolves do; they have no respect for life or limb: they simply want to fill their bellies. It is the way

of dogs, pigs and the world - Jesus was treated like that too ([Psalm 22:16](#)). And after Him, they hounded the church, persecuting the apostles - seeking to destroy the holy Body of Christ, the church ([Acts 9:1-5](#)). So Jesus advised that the disciples should be wise and alert to the real dangers, whilst presenting Jesus to the world ([Philippians 3:18-21](#)). Meanwhile, false teachers are like dogs who used God's holy people for their own purposes ([Isaiah 56:11](#); [Revelation 22:15](#)).

Jesus, the church, the gospel and the Bible are precious. Without exposure to them, the world cannot know how to be saved. But at the same time the world and its evil master hates them and will do whatever is necessary to try to destroy them. So Christians worldwide, and all servants of the gospel, are treading a tightrope as they share the information which will expose evil and command obedience to Christ. They must speak about Jesus but always risk persecution. So, both they and we need to discern which people are hungry for the message, because they value what God has for them, and which want to destroy the message, its messengers and its followers.

Prayer

Heavenly Father. Thank You for the people who told me how to put my faith in Jesus. They risked their own comfort to bring me the gospel. Thank You too for those who have suffered because they have offered Christ in the home, community and workplace. Forgive me for either being too reserved, or not discerning enough. Help me to grow in my desire for people to know You and help me to discern the people to whom you are leading me. When persecution comes, may I rejoice that Christ has been presented. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

God's Good Answers

Matthew 7:7-11

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! (NIVUK)

God is a real person, and He relates with people who honour Him. He is a good and loving Father who cares for His children and gladly responds to their calls for help (John 16:23). Indeed, if we do not call on our Father for help, how can we claim to be His children? The reality of life is that we have nothing when we come into the world, and so everything we have comes from Him, directly or indirectly (1 Chronicles 29:14). He is the ultimate provider; and when we tell Him how dependent we are upon Him - we worship Him (Psalm 50:14-15). And so our dependency, expressed in requests and prayers, is an essential part of being in relationship with Him (Matthew 6:6).

Asking, seeking and knocking are deliberate, chosen activities. They will only occur if we admit that we cannot find His answers, direction or welcome without Him (John 15:5-8), because there is no other way of receiving, finding and opening the treasures God intends for us. But when we admit our frail inability to God, He responds by giving, revealing and accepting us. That is all undeserved and part of His grace (John 1:16). When God gives, the gifts are very good, generous, appropriate and kind. Even though we are sinful and undeserving people, the Lord does not despise us or trick us, offering substandard benefits (Ephesians 3:20).

These verses are so obvious in their meaning that there should be no confusion. However, the real test of understanding is whether we use the information or not. Sadly there are very many believers who do not. They have needs, so they worry; they feel lost, and so they generate activity rather than seeking direction; they feel shut out, but do not ask the Lord to open the door. Despite all of Jesus' teaching, many people behave as though they have no Heavenly Father, or that He does not love them, or that He is not kind and generous.

The antidote to such wrong beliefs is to repent and then be obedient. So when a need occurs, ask the Lord for help; when something important is hidden from you, seek it through prayer rather than self-effort; and when a door is shut, ask the Lord to open it. Do not be simply passive or fatalistic; be active and ask God. In the same way that spiritual inertia becomes a habit which prevents us moving on, so active and expectant praying can and should become a habit. Start today and practise seeking the Lord every day until it becomes second nature.

Prayer

Father God. Thank You for being willing to provide for all my needs, spiritual, emotional, mental and physical. I am sorry for my pride or wrong assumption that You would not be willing to help me, so I have got out of the habit of seeking Your answers. Please help me to start again today, praying to You every time I identify issues which I cannot resolve. And help me to remember to be thankful for Your answers. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

God's Test of Right Living

Matthew 7:12

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets. (NIVUK)

This verse is well known and even quoted by people outside the Christian faith. It has a 'ring of rightness' about it. This 'Golden Rule' (as some people call it) is a practical test of righteousness: would we like others to do good to us, and would we want to hear kind words from the lips of other people? Then, we should behave like that towards them.

The sentence begins with a Greek word translated as 'So' or 'Therefore'. That means that Jesus' statement is related to what He has previously said about our parental instinct to give good gifts to our children, and Father God's unchanging character expressed by His good and perfect gifts to those who trust Him (Matthew 7:7-11; James 1:17). Because only good things come to us from God, what should come from us to others? Surely only good things!

At the lowest level of ethics, if we want other people to behave well towards us, we should treat them in the same way – all the time. However, trying to do good with an unrighteous heart will always lead to religious hypocrisy. That is why Jesus said in Matthew 5:20, "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." The Pharisees wanted to look good, but they failed to be righteous 'in everything' because they had not asked God for a new heart (Jeremiah 29:13; Joel 2:12). Their religious pride prevented them being hungry for the right kind of heart.

Consistent righteous living is impossible without a heart which is fixed on the Lord, desiring what He desires and being willing to obey whatever the cost. In comparison, religious activities are easy: presenting our rehearsed devotions to admiring people. The Lord is not looking on the outside, but the inside (1 Samuel 16:7). And yet what is inside our hearts comes to the surface in the unprepared and stressful times (Matthew 15:19). So although the 'Golden Rule' of this verse is an excellent test of our hearts, we cannot change our hearts by manipulating our behaviour. Firstly we need to seek the Lord with all our heart, and then He will enable us to live in a way which pleases Him and our family and neighbours and work colleagues.

Prayer

Heavenly Father. Thank You for knowing me completely. I am ashamed that my life is not consistently righteous, and that I have learned to cloak my unrighteousness in religious activities. I understand that You do not look at my outward display of piety, but at my heart. Create in me a pure heart, O God; and renew my spirit so that it will be consistently looking to You. Please help me to have spiritual integrity so that I will honour You in the family and at work, as well as in the church. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

The Narrow Road to Life

Matthew 7:13-14

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. (NIVUK)

Jesus drew a word-picture of two different ways through life as two roads entered by two different gates. Most people travel on the broad road; it is wide enough to accommodate everybody. They did not necessarily choose the path, they just followed everybody else. The way onto that path was well trodden, without any obstructions, and no indication that it will end in disaster. The second road is much narrower. Even so, it was not crowded. The entrance to that path was not easy to locate; people had to search until they found it. At the end of the narrow path, it widened out to a remarkable place which was full of life. On the face of it, the choice of which road is obvious: the one which ends in life. But most people were not on that road.

Jesus instructed His listeners to enter the narrow gate. That required an active choice: to ignore the wide gate and abandon the broad way. However, the narrow gate was hidden to most people; only those who sought it out would find it - hence the command to search for the gate and enter it (Matthew 7:7). Most people live for the moment. They cannot see the consequences of their actions and unless they have instructions from God, they cannot know what lies at the end of the road. That is why the Bible has been written, to tell us the things we cannot otherwise know; things which are critical to our eternal future.

Those two roads still exist. Everybody is on one or the other. Most people are on the broad road which goes far away from God, never passes the cross of Christ and leads to hell. By contrast, Jesus Christ is the narrow gate which

allows one-by-one entry to eternal life (John 10:7-9), as we surrender our sins to Christ's blood and our lives to Christ's glory. Its destination is the presence of God (Revelation 7:9-12).

But it is a hard choice to enter and to stay on that path. Our friends and colleagues will mock us, our family may reject us and the world will think we are fools. Persecution will be normal, loneliness may be frequent, and life in the fast lane will seem to pass us by. But God will be our friend, Jesus will be our advocate and the Holy Spirit will be our comforter: instead of hell, we find heaven at the end of the road. Instead of isolation, we will gather with millions of other believers. So, enter the narrow gate, stay on the narrow way and encourage your friends and colleagues to do the same (www.crosscheck.org.uk).

Prayer

Lord God. Thank You for opening up a new way so that people can come to You. I am sorry for failing to see how many people around me are heading for destruction, and I repent of failing to tell others about the narrow gate which is by the cross of Jesus. Please help me to be encouraged as I walk a different path to many of my friends. May I be a good witness to the grace of Christ and have the courage to explain to them how they can find the narrow gate, and start to walk on the narrow road. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

Convincing but False

Matthew 7:15-19

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognise them. Do people pick grapes from thorn-bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (NIVUK)

It would be nice to think that everybody who claims to speak for God is one of His messengers. But that is not true. There are true prophets who are submitted to Jesus, and false prophets who are not. They have very different hearts, and their messages are as different as life and death. False prophets may speak in a very convincing manner and many people may be persuaded to follow them; but that does not make them true or safe. In fact, they are very dangerous (2 Peter 2:1).

Jesus told His disciples to be on their guard, to watch out for false prophets. God's people are like sheep, Jesus is the Lamb of God and pastors are God's under-shepherds. But the false prophets are really wolves even though they are dressed up to appear like sheep or shepherds. Their motive is not to build God's kingdom, but their own (John 10:7-13). They like to control people to feed their own hunger for power and money. They do not want to serve and liberate the sheep; instead, they want to dominate and trap them. As they do so, they deprive the sheep of a balanced spiritual diet, and lead them away from the real Jesus, leaving them exposed to evil.

So how can we recognise false prophets? Jesus said that what is inside every person will always come out in some way. People may practise exciting words

and actions; but look out for their reactions to unexpected circumstances, their lifestyle, which will always reflect what is in their heart. In the same way that a thorn bush cannot produce sweet grapes, an evil heart cannot naturally express joy and peace. If a tree is diseased, it cannot produce good fruit. Neither can a false prophet lead people into relationship with God (Lamentations 2:14).

False prophets are everywhere (Matthew 24:11). They are Satan's secret agents; but often they do not realise that they themselves have been trapped, and their fleshliness is being manipulated to claim spiritual power. Watch out for them. Expect them to be there, as the Apostle Paul identified in the Ephesian church (Acts 20:29-31). They may do a lot of damage if left unchecked. However successful they may appear to be, God knows them - and if they do not repent they face the fire of God's wrath. So do not be naïve, discern who has God's approval before you follow (1 John 4:1).

Prayer

God of truth and love. Thank You that Jesus Christ is fully trustworthy and has appointed leaders in His church. However, I accept His words that false prophets will seek to infiltrate the church and are not easy to detect. Forgive me for being naïve in the past and undiscerning when seeking spiritual advice. Please help me to be alert to those people whose fleshly ambitions are being manipulated by Satan. Help me to stay clear of them and to protect more vulnerable believers. May the false prophets come to repentance; and may the true messengers of God be strengthened for their vital task of bringing Your truth to a confused world. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

False Disciples

Matthew 7:20-23

Thus, by their fruit you will recognise them. '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. 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?" Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!"' (NIVUK)

You know what people are really like by seeing what they do over a long period of time. The 'fruit' of their lives is the natural expression of what is in their hearts. That is how to identify false prophets (Matthew 7:15-20). Jesus had been referring to the religious leaders of His day who claimed to speak for God but were opposed to His will. As Jesus preached and did many miracles, a large crowd of people followed Him. They claimed to be His disciples, but many were not.

Jesus knew what was in their hearts. They really wanted to be fed (John 6:26-29) or to be delivered from Roman occupation (John 6:15), or to exercise spiritual power (Acts 8:18-23). They were false disciples; and when Jesus told them that His earthly destiny was betrayal, suffering and death - they stopped following Him (John 6:66-69). Their dream of sharing Christ's glory did not include taking up their cross (Matthew 10:38); and so they left Him.

Not everyone who claims to be a disciple of Jesus is a true disciple. Even people who build their reputation through powerful speaking and miracles are false disciples if they are not doing the Father's will (Matthew 24:24). Indeed, Jesus predicted that on Judgement Day many religious people would present their power-packed lives before Him: but they would be rejected from heaven

because they had failed to do what Father God had commanded them. They were hypocrites who had done their own will, sought their own glory and received their own reward of human applause (Matthew 6:1; Matthew 6:5; Matthew 6:16). God's will had been ignored and His reward forfeited.

It seems strange that Jesus should describe some preaching, exorcism and miracles as "evil-doing"; especially if it is in Jesus' Name. But if it is not God's will, it is evil. This would have been sobering for the twelve disciples and Peter would have remembered it when Jesus called him, 'Satan', when he tried to obstruct God's will (Matthew 16:23). If those who Christ appointed as apostles needed to hear this challenge to surrender every motive and action to God's will ... so do we. All who work for Christ need to make sure that they are doing the Father's will and not their own, whatever the context ... home or work or church. "Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the Lord." (Lamentations 3:40)

Prayer

Lord God, Judge of all. Thank You for warning me of the basis on which You will judge me. I repent of my pride and self-righteousness which is really hypocrisy. Please show me again how I may best please You, and give me the courage to deny myself and take up my cross and follow Jesus. In His Name. Amen.

Notes

Wise and Foolish Builders

Matthew 7:24-27

'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. 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. 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. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.'^(NIVUK)

This well-known parable of Jesus comes at the end of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5-7) as a practical summary of the Sermon's purpose. Jesus did not teach to amuse the crowds, but to give His trainee apostles clarity about the radically different nature of His kingdom, and what that looks like in everyday life (Matthew 5:1-2).

At the end of all the teaching, Jesus said that there is a choice: to take it on board and do it, or to ignore it. The parable is about two houses, which might have seemed similar, but they were built on different foundations. The architects, engineers and construction workers design and build to meet the job specification. But the most important part of any structure is not what you can see. The foundation is below ground and determines the building's ability to stand securely. Building on rock is safe, but building on sand is at risk of collapse because the rain will wash the sand away, and the structure will fail.

Jesus said that people who build their lives on what He says, are 'safer than houses'. Whatever trouble life may throw at God's children, they will withstand every test because they are built on the Rock - who is Christ (1 Corinthians 10:3-4). The only way to build on Him is to hear, trust and obey what He says: after

that it is up to Him to keep us secure. Listening to Jesus and obeying Him is the essence of wisdom. Anything else is the essence of foolishness, which will always result in personal spiritual failure.

This parable was directed first at the trainee apostles, and now applies to everyone. That includes you! The message is not only about how to prevent spiritual collapse. More importantly it is about eternal security. However strong we think we are, we are weak. Living without obeying Jesus is the prelude to disaster in this life and the next. Hearing God's Word, but failing to obey is just as bad. By contrast, when we are eager to do what the Lord commands, we become secure because Jesus is our Foundation Rock. So, find one instruction which Jesus gave in this Sermon on the Mount; then choose to practice it, today!

Prayer

Almighty God, my Heavenly Father. Thank You for providing Jesus as a totally secure foundation for sinful human beings. Thank You for His loving sacrifice, the promise of forgiveness and the truth of His Word. Forgive me when I have heard but failed to obey, and when I have built my life on worldly foundations which cannot keep me safe. Please give me an increased hunger for Your Word and an increased zeal in doing it. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

The Authority Behind the Words

Matthew 7:28-29

When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law. (NIVUK)

We all say many words, probably too many. But which of all those words will really make a lifetime's or eternal difference to anybody? When Jesus spoke, people always took notice. His teaching was memorable because it was more than words. People recognised it as being authoritative and authentic even if they did not like what they heard; and they knew that they were accountable for their response (Mark 1:21-28). Although Jesus had been primarily explaining the principles of His kingdom to His trainee apostles to pass on to the church (1 Thessalonians 4:2), the crowds who clustered around them had never heard anything like it. It was as though God was speaking to them. He was!

Authority is different to power. Power is an ability to make something happen, or to make other people do what you want. On the other hand, authority is the right to make something happen and to encourage others to respond to what is true. The word 'author' comes from the same root. An author has the right to say what should happen to what he or she has created (we call it the author's 'copyright' or the inventor's 'patent'). Jesus has both authority and power: He has the right to declare the truth and the power to bring people to account (Luke 4:36).

Jesus is described as the 'Author of life' (Acts 3:15) because He is the life-giver; and the 'Author of salvation' (Hebrews 2:10) because He invented it. He is also the 'Author of our faith' (Hebrews 12:2). He is the authority behind all life on this earth, and eternal life and faith in God. That is why His words have His

personality stamped on them. That was remarkably different from the religious teachers who copied God's words, but could not keep them: they had no internal integrity.

One reason that some people do not want to read what Jesus said, is in case they find the truth inescapable. And ultimately, it is! Everybody who seeks the truth will only find it in Jesus, because He is the truth (John 14:6). What He says, is the same as who He is. He said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:31-32). Although we may have very busy days and be involved with many activities, our priority should be to take Jesus much more seriously if we are to live true to the truth. Short-term, life will not make sense without Him, and long-term, we are accountable to Him. So, now that we are at the end of this Sermon on the Mount, why not read one of Jesus' sayings again, meditate on it, and ask Him to make clear what He wants you to do.

Prayer

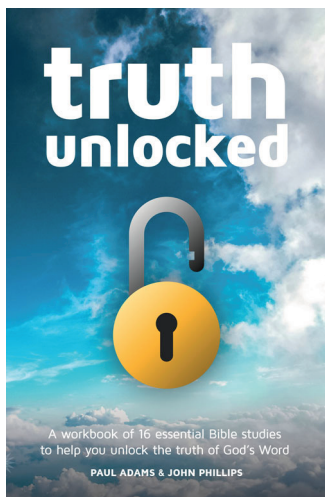
God of truth. Thank You that everything Jesus said was authentic and completely consistent with His divine character. I am sorry when I have ignored His words, perhaps fearing that He is right and I am wrong. I know that whatever You say is right. Please help me to decide not to avoid Your Word and to be willing to let You speak to me today. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Notes

Personal Reflections

A large, empty rectangular area with a light gray background, intended for personal reflections. A thin green vertical line is on the left side.

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