

THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM

Theirs is the **KINGDOM**

An Exposition
of the
Sermon on the Mount

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SEEKING CHRIST



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**Theirs is the Kingdom:
An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount**

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For my precious Lilly

“Not even Solomon, in all his glory...”

Matthew 6:29

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PREFACE

Jesus' teaching seems to always have a profound effect on whomever hears it. Once I was speaking with a man I had just met, when our conversation quickly drifted into the topic of the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The man was not himself a Christian, but I was struck by how impressed he was with Jesus, specifically with Jesus' teachings. The man knew a great deal about the biblical accounts of Jesus' life, but he had mentioned briefly how he had serious doubts about many of the claims that the gospel writers made about Jesus. He expressed that he had a hard time believing in Jesus' virgin birth, much less his resurrection from the dead or ascension into heaven. But strangely the man could not get over how powerful were Jesus' ethical commands. I doubt I will ever forget the amazed, even bewildered look on the man's face when he recalled Jesus' famous words. "Love your enemies?" he rhetorically asked. "Can you imagine?" It occurred to me that I, having long been a believer in Christ, had never quite appreciated the intensity of all that Jesus taught.

However, it was shortly after this conversation when I realized, while this man had grasped something of the weightiness of Jesus' words, there was something he was missing about Jesus' teaching as well.

With another person, this time a friend of mine and a fellow believer, I likewise got onto the subject of Jesus' teaching, and we were specifically discussing the Sermon on the Mount. My friend said something I had heard a number of times before from other Christian students of the Bible. My friend described the teaching found in the Sermon on the Mount by saying that it was given "for the purpose of displaying to the hearer his need for a Savior." See, to my friend, and likely to a great many other Christians, Jesus' teaching was basically an evangelistic tool. It was not, in their mind, specifically given for the purpose of changing anyone's behavior.

Rather it was designed to change the hearer's view of himself, making him more receptive to the gospel message.

I have come to realize that my friend was actually making the same mistake regarding the understanding of Jesus' teaching that the unbelieving man did. See, while both of these people, my Christian friend and the unbeliever, had grasped something of the majesty of Jesus' teaching, both were also missing one crucial point. It is indeed true that simply reading Jesus' words can touch one's heart deeply. It is true that a person's own frailty will be exposed, hopefully making him cry out in faith for the help of a Savior. But to stop there, or to see this as the primary purpose behind Jesus' giving of these teachings, is actually to miss the point.

"If you know these things, blessed are you *if you do them*" (John 13:17).

It seems obvious, but strangely it is often missed. Jesus' commands are just that: commands! It is one thing to notice that Jesus' words are admirable, but it is something else entirely to accept that He actually wants us to obey, that is, to *do* these crazy things that he is commanding. Jesus did not conclude this sermon by saying, "Please note the depth, beauty, and intensity of my words. Perhaps even reflect upon your own frailty in light of them." We indeed would do well to admire Jesus' words and, in doing so, to notice our own deficiency; but remember Jesus' real conclusion. Jesus' final words to his hearers consisted of the illustration of the wise and foolish builders. The wise man, in the illustration, is said to picture those who "hear these words of mine *and do them!*"

Now, we must admit, that once you begin to get into the depth of Jesus' sermon, you will start to realize that this discourse is the highest revelation of righteousness ever delivered to mankind. You may even begin to sympathize with the many readers who seek for other ways of understanding Jesus' words, ways that exempt hearers from total obedience to them. Jesus says things such as, "Love your enemies," and, "Turn the other cheek." He forbids not only adultery, but a lustful heart; not only murder, but unjust anger. The temptation

will arise to join the diverse crowd, saying things like, “The Sermon on the Mount is really just for the Jews during the Millennial Era,” or, “Matthew 5-7 was actually intended to be used as an evangelistic tool, merely showing sinners their own short-comings.” At this outset of our study, please hear me to say: Resist this temptation! Remember Jesus’ words: “He who hears these words of mine *and does them...*”

But if these teachings are so high, so beyond anything else ever given, the natural question is how we, as mere mortal men, can be expected to entertain thoughts of obedience to them. How can we do anything but dismiss them as some impossible ideal? There is an answer to this problem. At the outset of this study, I want the reader to know that there is a secret found within the text of the Sermon on the Mount, as well as in other places in the New Testament, that makes these seemingly impossible commands easier to embrace.

The details regarding this “secret” will be discussed later in this work (see **Chapter 8: How to Gain this Righteousness** and **Chapter 9: The Conclusion**). For now, though, allow me to just give a short word of encouragement. Please do not be dismayed. Obedience to these teachings of Jesus is not so far out of reach as it may appear. By this I do not at all mean to imply that Jesus’ words are less severe or direct than is commonly understood. In fact, as we go through the study, I believe you will find that in many cases quite the opposite is true. Very often, though Jesus’ words are straight forward and direct, commentators and preachers have attempted to tone down or soften the teaching in order to make Jesus’ words more palatable. No, Jesus does, in fact, mean exactly what he says. However, what I am saying is that in addition to his commands, Jesus also offers *help*. Jesus does not simply give his commands and then leave those in his audience alone, to try with futility to obey them with their own strength. Jesus encourages those who might wonder how they could ever be able to find within themselves the ability to obey him, by saying further, “Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock and it will be opened to you.” Jesus’ demands are high, but he does not

demand anything that he will not also give. The one giving the teaching is also the one who supplies the help.

Again, there will be more detail on this particular section of the teaching in later chapters. All that I am intending to point out up front is what I see to be Jesus' response to what I am certain he foresaw as a common reaction to this entire message, to this highest standard of righteousness ever given to man. Jesus' response to our every objection seems to be:

“So, you can't do it yourself?

Do you need help?

Ask!”

1 THE KINGDOM

Too often readers miss the fact that Jesus had a distinct and discernable message that he intended to convey in giving the Sermon on the Mount. Many wrongly treat Jesus' words as though they were a somewhat random collection of proverbs and ethical truisms.¹ A proper understanding of Jesus' message will reveal, however, that each section of the sermon flows logically and naturally from the previous section and into the next. The careful reader can notice that the sermon as a whole has one coherent, all-encompassing message. Jesus gives a clue as to what this message is in the sermon's introductory sentence:

“Let the spiritually poor be happy, because the kingdom of the heavens is theirs.”²

Matthew 5:3

With these introductory words, Jesus gives us a basic insight into what his teaching is going to be all about. A detailed explanation will follow, but first, just a basic summary. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, is teaching his disciples what is required of them in order to enter and inherit the coming messianic kingdom. This is the all-encompassing message of the sermon. All of the ethical instructions that Jesus gives, we will see, come back to relate to the disciple's potential standing in the coming kingdom.

Because of this fact, before going into the text of the sermon or looking otherwise at the sermon's context, we would do well to look into what exactly Jesus is talking about when he refers to this kingdom. No item is given as much prominence within Jesus' teaching as the concept of “the Kingdom.” Thirty-six times in the

gospel of Matthew alone Jesus makes mention of either “the Kingdom of God” or “the Kingdom of Heaven.” With this topic being of such obvious importance to the Lord, it is unfortunate that Christians are so divided and even confused as to what exactly this “kingdom” is.

What (and When) is the Kingdom?

When reading secular history, if you come to a discussion about a “kingdom,” it should be fairly clear what type of thing is being discussed. For example, if a historian refers to the “kingdom” of Henry VIII, we know without controversy that the historian is referring to England during the first half of the sixteenth century. There was an observable civil government, with King Henry VIII as the seated monarch, ruling over a specific portion of land. This is the common, literal definition of a kingdom.

The problem is, though Jesus spoke (as did his forerunner, John the Baptist) about the arrival of a kingdom, there was no immediate appearance of anything that resembled a kingdom in the normal sense. The same civil governments remained in place and ruled over the same portions of land during the entire course of Jesus’ ministry; they remained in place even after his departure. No new kingdom immediately appeared. What then did Jesus mean when he spoke about his kingdom?

There are two basic ways of approaching an understanding of Jesus’ meaning. Firstly, one can suppose that something happened that caused Jesus’ proclamation of a coming kingdom to fail to come to fruition. In other words, Jesus meant “kingdom” in the same way as is generally understood, but either he was wrong about its imminent arrival, or perhaps something transpired which delayed it. The second approach is to assume that Jesus was simply borrowing the word “kingdom,” or using it in a figurative sense, referring instead to something entirely different from what a kingdom is normally understood to be.

In a sense, we are trying to discern, not only *what* the kingdom is, but also *when* the kingdom is. In a figurative sense, “the kingdom of God” is understood as a *present* experience of God’s working. This is how many contemporary Christians understand the expression. If such an understanding is correct, then we must conclude that Jesus used the word “kingdom” to refer to something quite different from its common, literal use. Others teach the *kingdom* as a literal entity, but as something taking place at a *future* time, a time when the kingdom’s existence will be obvious to believers and non-believers alike.

There are two theologians who defend the above two different understandings of the kingdom. Holding to the non-literal “present experience” view, is theologian N.T. Wright, and one who held to the future experience (and literal) view was the late Robert Govett. A look at how each of these men understand Jesus’ reference to his kingdom will help in gaining a proper and balanced view of what the kingdom actually is. We will start with Wright’s view.

N.T. Wright understands Jesus’ “kingdom” as essentially a “putting to rights” (his expression) of the created yet fallen world. Wright teaches, in no uncertain terms, that the coming of this kingdom (or the beginning of “God’s sovereign rule coming ‘on earth as it is in heaven’”),³ was inaugurated by Jesus’ resurrection from the dead; and thus it is something that is taking place *at the present time*. In chapter 12 of his book *Simply Jesus*, Mr. Wright discusses the prophecy in Isaiah 40-55. He makes a very interesting point about the two ideas he sees in this passage. He expresses these two ideas as “the return of YHWH to Zion, on the one hand, and the suffering of the servant, on the other.”⁴

First, there is the “return of YHWH to Zion.” Wright sees this line of prophecy as describing the establishment of a powerful kingdom where the Lord himself conquers Israel’s pagan captors, restores his people to their land, and reigns himself, from Jerusalem, over all the nations of the earth.

Second, Wright sees the other prophetic line describing the vicarious and sacrificial death of a “suffering servant” who dies to make atonement for the sins of his people. Wright sees both of these two lines of prophecy, obviously, as finding their fulfillment in Jesus.

The interesting (and somewhat unique) idea that Wright puts forth is that these two prophecies are, in fact, more linked together than is generally understood. He says, “This kingdom agenda, this rescue project, this return of YHWH to Zion, will be accomplished through the work, and now specifically the death, of the servant.”⁵ Wright later even more boldly says, “The return of YHWH to Zion, on the one hand, and the suffering of the servant, on the other, turn out to be—almost unbelievably, as the prophet realizes—two ways of saying the same thing.”⁶

Wright sees the two prophetic lines as referring to one and the same event. To him, the sacrificial death of Christ is one and the same thing as the establishment of the kingdom described in Isaiah. Therefore, when Jesus in the gospels mentions “the kingdom,” including here in Matthew 5:3-12, he must be referring to the Church, the Gospel, or some other thing that is beginning *immediately*. In conjunction with the rest of his body of work, Wright sees this “kingdom of heaven” as being a renewal of the earth, as foretold by the prophets, that Jesus and his followers are in charge of bringing about *during the present age*.⁷

On the other hand, in his classic work entitled *The Sermon on the Mount Expounded*, Robert Govett views things very differently. Govett does not see “the kingdom” in Matthew 5:3 as something that was to begin immediately. He says, “It (the kingdom of heaven) really means, in every case—THE MILLENNIAL KINGDOM OF MESSIAH...It is the kingdom which Israel was then expecting; a kingdom in which the patriarchs and prophets are to have part in by rising from the dead: Matt. viii. 11.”⁸ For Govett, the kingdom is not something that commences with the cross or the resurrection of Jesus, but rather it is something that awaits Jesus’ second coming and the resurrection of “the last day” (John 6:40).

Who then, has the correct perspective? When Jesus refers to “the kingdom of the heavens” (“heavens” is plural in the original Greek), is he talking about something that, as Wright would say, began immediately at his first coming, being ushered in by his own resurrection? Or, is Govett correct in seeing this kingdom as awaiting Jesus’ return to the earth and the final resurrection of the last day?

Before answering the above questions, it must be pointed out that there is much about which those who hold these opposing positions actually agree. Firstly, both Wright and Govett agree that the nation of Israel, during the period leading up to Jesus’ ministry, had expectations of an earthly revolution and kingdom to be set up by the coming Messiah.^{9 10} Govett believes that the Israelites were not so far off in expecting an earthly, revolutionary kingdom. According to him, they simply misunderstood the timing of that kingdom and, more importantly, their own need for repentance in order to gain entrance therein. Wright, it seems, in rejecting outright the idea of a national, political kingdom, thinks that the first century Jews were greatly misunderstanding what Isaiah and the other prophets were getting at.

More importantly, both Wright and Govett seem to agree that, despite being called “the kingdom *of the heavens*,” Jesus’ primary focus for this kingdom is its expression *on the earth*. Both Wright and Govett refer to Jesus’ phraseology in the model prayer in the Sermon on the Mount. When Jesus says to pray, “let your kingdom come” and “let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” Wright and Govett appear to concur that the important point being made about this heavenly kingdom is that it will, at some point, move to the *earth*.^{11 12}

If both Wright and Govett are correct that the kingdom that Jesus refers to is primarily concerned with its establishment on “the earth,” then the common understanding of this kingdom being what is commonly referred to as “heaven,” the eternal dwelling place of the believer, must be refused. Despite often being the focus of much Christian discussion and activity over the past several centuries, “Where do you go when you die?” is a question not often addressed

in the scriptures.¹³ Jesus and the writers of the New Testament did not primarily view the believers' hope as "going to heaven when they die." Rather, Jesus and his New Testament authors stress that, although they may die, there will be a day when they will "rise again" (John 5:25; 6:40; 1 Corinthians 15:16-19). The question with this passage is whether this resurrection, that John 6:40 says is to take place "on the last day," *precedes* or *follows* the establishment of Jesus' kingdom, and thus, for believers today, whether the kingdom is something that is already here, or is it something that is still yet to come.

The Kingdom Is Yet to Come

Govett makes quite a compelling case for the "future kingdom" position. He says this kingdom should be understood as awaiting its inauguration until Jesus' second coming and the resurrection of the dead that will be associated with it.

Govett points out that Matthew 8:11 states the patriarchs will be reclining at table in this "kingdom of the heavens." If the kingdom of the heavens will in fact be an earthly reality, then of course resurrection will be necessary for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to be there. Govett points out that elsewhere, when proving the doctrine of resurrection, Jesus uses these same three: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as being examples of those who most certainly will be raised.¹⁴ Govett also points out that, later in the same sermon (Matthew 7:21-23), entrance into the "kingdom of the heavens" is given or refused "by Christ at his advent."¹⁵ According to John 12:48, the judgment will take place "on the last day." This must be parallel with the judgment which Jesus in Matthew 7:21,22 says will take place "on that day." This "last day" judgment and subsequent entrance or non-entrance into the "kingdom of the heavens" coincides with Jesus' sayings in John 6:40,44,54 as to when the resurrection will take place. It seems clear, by these verses, that "the kingdom of the heavens" awaits Jesus' second coming and the final resurrection of the dead. Its inauguration is, for us today, a future event.

That's all pretty clear, isn't it?

But what would N.T. Wright have to say about this? Are there not other scriptures that would establish Wright's point, implying or even declaring that "the kingdom" is something that already began with the first advent of Christ?¹⁶

The Kingdom Is Now Here

Jesus' experience with the Pharisees as described in Matthew 12:22-32 is probably the best text used to defend the notion that "the kingdom" Jesus refers to so often is something that did, in fact, commence with his first coming. In this passage the Pharisees, seeing that Jesus is able to cast out demons by the power of his spoken word, accuse him of operating under the power of "Beelzebul" (later confirmed in verse 26 to be a reference to Satan). Wright makes a few important observations about Jesus' response to this accusation.¹⁷

Firstly, Wright mentions Jesus' pointing out the obvious: Satan's kingdom does not oppose itself.

Secondly, Wright tells of Jesus' making a point that concerns "the kingdom of God."¹⁸ Jesus tells the Pharisees that if it is by the Spirit of God that he casts out demons (and, as Wright points out, this is the only option left since it is absurd to assume Satan would do such a thing) then "the kingdom of God has come upon you." Wright sees this statement as proving that the kingdom was arriving right then. He disagrees with Govett. He would say the manifestation of the kingdom does not have to wait for the second coming, the final resurrection, or anything else. Indeed, Jesus did not say, "Then you have a foretaste of what the kingdom of God will be like." He said, "The kingdom of God *has come* upon you." This parallels Jesus' words in Luke 17:20,21 when he says, again to the Pharisees, "The kingdom of God is not coming with observation...for behold, the kingdom of God *is in your midst*." The Pharisees, probably based upon their reading of the Old Testament, were looking for the physical manifestation of a national kingdom. Their hardness of heart

caused them to miss the fact that the kingdom was, at least in some respect, already there.

Those who defend an essentially future concept of the kingdom (and I must confess here that I put myself into this category) must acknowledge this truth about the spiritual and present facet of the kingdom's existence. Even Robert Govett, while he claims that the phrase "the kingdom of the heavens" exclusively refers to the yet-to-come millennial kingdom of Christ, nevertheless concedes elsewhere that there is an aspect of God's kingdom that exists on the earth prior to that period.¹⁹ While the kingdom is *essentially* future in its establishment, there is a spiritual sense in which God has already "delivered us from the authority of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Colossians 1:13). Where Jesus is, whether in body or in spirit, *there the kingdom of God is as well*. That is why Jesus was able to tell the Pharisees, "The kingdom of God is in your midst" (Luke 17:21; Matthew 12:28).

Wright seems to go along with what some theologians refer to as the "already/not yet" principle. Wright sees the passage in Matthew 12 as proving that "God's kingdom, God's sovereign and saving rule, really is breaking in, on earth as in heaven;"²⁰ but to him, this only confirms that there has been an "initial victory" already in the war to establish God's kingdom. However, Wright still does understand the need for a "final battle" to firmly establish God's victory. Therefore, in some sense or other, both Govett and Wright concede that, during the ministry of Jesus on the earth, both statements are true in their own respect: The kingdom is, in fact, here "already." The kingdom also remains "yet to come."

However, where N.T. Wright's understanding (and that of a growing number of similarly minded theologians) begins to go off-track in my opinion is with his explanation of the *when* of this "final battle." If you read Wright carefully, you will see that for him, though the kingdom *was* "already/not yet" in Jesus' own day, at the present time, Wright's "kingdom" would be really only "already." Wright does not see the "final battle" as being something to take

place at the end of human history, but rather as something that took place, in its fullness, at the cross of Christ. “Somehow it appears that Jesus’s battle with the satan, which was the battle for God’s kingdom to be established on earth as in heaven, reached its climax in his death.”²¹

Indeed there is an element of scriptural support for N.T. Wright’s idea. Most notably the verse in John 12 when Jesus, in reference to his upcoming crucifixion, says, “Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:31 ESV).

We must concede that the aforementioned verses (John 12; Matthew 12; Luke 17) confirm that God’s official stripping of Satan’s authority did, in fact, take place at the cross. Jesus declares, following his resurrection, that “all authority in heaven and on the earth was given to me” (Matthew 28:18).

But, and this is where Wright misses it, we will err greatly if we suppose that this is the end of the story! Judgment has already been given to Jesus (John 5:22); yet the *final execution* of that judgment awaits the second advent of Christ. In the same way, though Satan has been already officially stripped of his authority, his final and practical casting down awaits the future kingdom period of a thousand years (Revelation 20:2,10). Yes, though God’s enemy is even now officially stripped of his authority, yet he still is reckoned the “god of this age” (2 Corinthians 4:4) who “prowls around like a roaring lion” (1 Peter 5:8).

Going back to Matthew 12, Wright is correct to connect the coming of the kingdom spoken of in Matthew 12:28 with Jesus’ words in Matthew 12:29: “Or how is someone able to enter the mighty man’s house and plunder his goods unless first he binds the mighty man? Then, also he will plunder his house.” But Wright is *incorrect* to assume that *today* is essentially the day of “the plundering of the house.” There *will* be a glorious, *future* day of Jesus, with his saints, “plundering the house” of the world, which today is referred to as Satan’s domain. Revelation 11:15 speaks of a

time when loud voices in heaven will say, “The kingdom *of the world* has become that of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.” Revelation 20 also describes a time when Christ will reign with his companions for a thousand years, and this is said to be immediately *following, not preceding*, the time of the saints resurrection (Revelation 20:4) as well as following the enactment of Satan’s sentence (Revelation 20:2).²²

Therefore, in agreement with Old Testament prophecy “the kingdom of the heavens,” as proclaimed and taught about by Jesus, the period where God rules the earth as he does the heavens, while having a present, spiritual expression among God’s people today, must be correctly understood to be primarily a future reality.²³ Jesus, while now in heaven at the right hand of his Father, has a spiritual representative on the earth in the person of the Holy Spirit. Therefore he reigns, spiritually, to some degree, presently on the earth. However, the day is coming when Jesus himself will return to the earth. When he does he will establish the real, national kingdom of Israel, from where he will rule over all the earth for a thousand years. His kingdom is present spiritually, yes, but will be manifested openly in the future. This future, earthly kingdom is generally referred to as “the millennial kingdom” or simply as “the millennium,” because the book of Revelation describes this kingdom as lasting for a thousand years (Revelation 20:1-6).

So when Jesus speaks in the Sermon on the Mount about “the kingdom,” he is speaking about a future reality about which his original hearers likely already understood. More importantly, Jesus is also telling his disciples that they are being given the opportunity to have a part in the rulership of this kingdom once it arrives, depending on their obedience to the teaching that he is about to give.

Jesus will also explain that this future kingdom has a present experience available to his hearers. As they submit to Jesus’ ruling presently, they have an experience of the kingdom even now. This concept of the essentially future, yet spiritually present nature of the

kingdom is an extremely important concept to understand as we go forward in studying the Sermon on the Mount.

Now, Jesus did not speak simply of the arrival of his kingdom. In the Sermon on the Mount, what Jesus is primarily concerned with is his hearers' *entrance* or *non-entrance* into this kingdom. As we have touched on briefly already, and as will be established as we look at the sermon itself, there is a required level of righteousness and spiritual character for a disciple of Jesus to be permitted to enter the kingdom, and especially to be granted the privilege of reigning with Jesus there.

Different Concept Than Being “Born Again”

Before going any further into the discussion of Jesus' kingdom message, there is an important point that must be addressed.

It has been stated that Jesus is instructing his hearers about the spiritual condition of those who will inherit his kingdom. This fact should not, however, obscure for us another truth taught elsewhere in the scriptures. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus lays out, in a very clear way, the level of righteousness required for gaining entrance into the coming kingdom. However, this level of righteous living is *not* given as a criterion for receiving the gift of God referred to in John 3:3, the “new birth.” The spiritual experience of being “born again” is clearly laid out elsewhere in scripture as being a gift of God which requires no work from the one who receives it. Sometimes this “new birth” experience is referred to in scripture as “receiving eternal life” (John 3:36; 5:24; 6:47). At other times, it is referred to as receiving “salvation” or as being “saved” (Ephesians 2:8), and at still other times, the new birth experience is referred to as “justification” or “righteousness” (Romans 3:24; 5:17).

Especially within Protestant circles, Bible readers and commentators rightly hold very dearly to this doctrine of the freeness of God's gift of eternal life. The gift is rightly taught as being received by grace through faith. Through the sacrificial death of Jesus, God offers forgiveness of sins and new life in Christ to all who

will receive by faith. A biblical expression for this free gift of God, the one that will be used throughout this present work, is the phrase “new birth” or being “born again” (John 3:7). Apart from any merit of their own, sinners who are deserving of death and punishment, are forgiven of their sins because of the propitiating death of Jesus, and are given a spiritual “new life” through the person of the Holy Spirit. All of this is simply *given*, as a result of one’s faith in Christ. Perhaps the most famous passage in the whole Bible states this truth most eloquently: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him will not perish, but has eternal life.” Within evangelical circles, the doctrine of the “free gift” is generally taught with no objections. I ask you, reader, have you put your faith in the Lord Jesus? Have you believed in him, and by believing become one of God’s children? I encourage any who have not yet anchored their hope in the Savior, to read the Gospel According to John, to pray for God’s enlightenment, and to *believe*, and *receive* God’s free gift of eternal life!

However, perhaps out of fear of compromising this fundamental doctrine of God’s free gift of grace, many within these same evangelical circles often neglect, or even reject, the equally biblical doctrines of God’s reward and discipline of his own people. As we will see, it is this oft-neglected matter of God’s dealings with his own children that Jesus addresses in the Sermon on the Mount.

As is often the case with natural birth, spiritual “new birth” comes with certain *conditional* privileges and responsibilities. In the same way, natural birth is a process that can never be undone; so a believer’s status as being “born again” is something eternally secure (John 10:28,29).²⁴ However, when studying much of Jesus’ teaching, we will find that many of the privileges and responsibilities that are made available at the spiritual new birth can, in fact, be *forfeited* by the child of God, through disobedience and unfaithfulness. We will find, as we study the Sermon on the Mount, that reigning with Jesus in his coming kingdom is one of these privileges a genuine child of God might *forfeit* through disobedience or unfaithfulness.

Scattered throughout the New Testament, not least of all in the teachings of Jesus himself, we find teaching regarding God's *discipline* of his children, and often this discipline has to do with recompense *within the coming millennial kingdom*. This is a crucial point to understand. ***The kingdom, with its accompanying reward and loss for Jesus' disciples, is the subject primarily addressed in the Sermon on the Mount.*** Not the *gift* of new birth, but *reward* as it relates to the coming millennial kingdom is the subject addressed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. All of the disciples being instructed have already experienced the new birth by faith (with the obvious exception of Judas, the "son of perdition"). Jesus is not here explaining how to be born again, but is ***telling born again people what is required of them in order to receive the reward of reigning with Jesus in his coming kingdom.***

The importance of the distinction between these two biblical concepts cannot be overstated.²⁵ It was discussed earlier that the scriptures use different words and expressions to refer to the free gift; words like "salvation," "justification," and "life" or "eternal life." We need to be aware that these words and expressions, in the original Greek, do not *necessarily* point to the free gift. The Greek word translated "saved" (Greek: σῶζω), for example, can refer to the eternal salvation from God's judgment (such as in Ephesians 2:8,9), *or* it can refer to salvation from other things, like physical death (Acts 27:20), God's temporal judgment (James 5:15), bodily illness (Mark 5:23), etc. When studying the scriptures we need to be careful to avoid what is referred to as the "illegitimate identity transfer." Jody Dillow describes this hermeneutical error as being "when a meaning in one context is said to be the meaning in all contexts."²⁶ Unfortunately this error is quite common, especially with respect to fundamental doctrines. The fact is, however, that very often the biblical terminology used to describe each of the doctrinal principles we have mentioned, the *gift* of new birth and the *reward* pertaining to the kingdom, will overlap, often leading to confusion in study. We must be careful to avoid such a confusion.

We will evaluate the use of some of these overlapping terms later on as we continue our study through the Sermon on the Mount. We will find, of course, that context is the determining factor as to how the terms should be understood in each occurrence.²⁷ Because of the confusion that is sometimes caused by biblical terms with multiple meanings, throughout the remainder of this work the two doctrines being discussed will be called by the more specific terms: “*new birth*” (referring to eternal and irrevocable salvation which is gained by faith alone), and “*kingdom reward*” (referring to the reward and discipline within the millennial kingdom age of those who are already believers)

Now, let’s get into the text of the Sermon on the Mount itself.

¹ See, for example, Calvin’s comments on Matthew 7:12. (Calvin, J., & Pringle, W., 2010, p. Matt 7:12)

² In the original Greek, there is actually no verb in the opening clauses of each of the beatitude verses. The being verb “are” is supplied by most translations (“blessed *are* the poor in spirit,”) but just as well could the third-person imperative (Let...be) be supplied because of the imperative in the similarly constructed sentence in verse 12. This is the translation used here.

³ (Wright, *Surprised By Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, 2008, p. 18)

⁴ (Wright, *Simply Jesus*, 2011, p. 158)

⁵ (Wright, 2011, p. 155)

⁶ (Wright, 2011, p. 158)

⁷ (Wright, 2008, p. 201)

⁸ (Govett, *Sermon on the Mount*, 1984, pp. 7,8) (Reference and emphasis his)

⁹ (Wright, 2011, pp. 106-108)

¹⁰ (Govett, 1984, p. 7)

¹¹ (Wright, 2011, p. 148)

¹² (Govett, 1984, p. 170)

¹³ By this I do not mean to imply that the concept of where one goes when he dies is altogether ignored in the New Testament. There are a few places where this is discussed (see Luke 16:19-31 and 2 Corinthians 5:8).

¹⁴ (Govett, *Sermon on the Mount*, 1984, p. 7)

¹⁵ (Govett, 1984, p. 337)

¹⁶ (Wright, 2011, p. 158)

¹⁷ (Wright, 2011, p. 125)

¹⁸ It is noted that Jesus here uses the phrase “kingdom of God” rather than the phrase used in Matthew 5:3, “the kingdom of the heavens.” There is certainly some reason for the same gospel writer to have quoted Jesus as using the two separate phrases. However, considering the fact that these phrases are used interchangeably between different gospels (see Matthew 13:11 compared to Mark 4:11 for one example), I take them to be related closely enough that the proper interpretation of the passages being discussed can still be found without having to go into any detailed contrasting of the two.

¹⁹ (Govett, Kingdom of God Future, 1985, pp. 2, 3)

²⁰ (Wright, 2011, p. 125)

²¹ (Wright, 2011, p. 126)

²² It should be noted that Satan’s *final* sentence will be enacted at the end of the thousand years when he is cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:10), as Satan will be temporarily released from this temporary holding in the abyss at the end of the thousand years (Revelation 20:3,7-9).

²³ There are two other scriptural issues that similarly have this future/present expression that may help to explain this point. The first is the coming of “the lawless one” and the second is the matter of resurrection.

The apostle Paul, in the second letter to the Thessalonians, tells of the future revealing of “the man of lawlessness” (2 Thessalonians 2:3-6). This is parallel to the fact that, as has been shown, the kingdom of the heavens is also primarily future in its expression. In no uncertain terms, Paul describes the coming “lawless one” as being a literal man who will come on the scene in a future day, and he will exalt himself as being God. However, in that same chapter, Paul also speaks of what he calls the “mystery of lawlessness,” which is something that is clearly already present (2 Thessalonians 2:7). Similarly, John speaks of one coming that his hearers know of as the “antichrist,” but he also tells them of “many antichrists” who have already come, who receive that designation because of their false teaching about Jesus as the Christ (1 John 2:18,22). The eventual coming of this “antichrist” or “man of lawlessness” will certainly be a public and physical event, but these New Testament writers are warning that there is also a secret, spiritual reality that is already present and that awaits its public and physical manifestation. In a similar way, while the public manifestation of the heavenly kingdom awaits a future day, there is also a spiritual experience of that kingdom. As opposed to the lawlessness of the present day and the coming antichrist, the saints are told that they are citizens of this spiritual kingdom of God’s beloved Son (Colossians 1:17).

Though it has already been touched on in the body of this work, I would also like to elaborate a little more on the New Testament concept of “resurrection.”

This point is even more illustrative of the future/present reality of the kingdom of the heavens because resurrection is something that is shown to be closely linked with the coming of the kingdom (Revelation 20:6).

When Lazarus had died, Jesus came to console the family, and when he did he had a most interesting conversation with Martha, Lazarus' sister. Jesus told Martha in plain words, "Your brother will rise." Having spent much time with Jesus, Martha was aware of Jesus' plain teaching about a coming day of resurrection. She rightly knew that Jesus taught that the resurrection was to take place on "the last day" (John 11:24. See also John 6:40,44,54). Martha rightly understood the appointed *time*, but as Jesus will explain next, she missed the more important factor of the appointed *One*. Jesus does not argue with her about the future day of resurrection, but he does point out the more important fact about himself, saying, "*I am the resurrection and the life.*" Martha perhaps should have remembered Jesus' words in John 5:25 when he said of the resurrection, "the hour is coming *and is now here.*" The final resurrection does have an appointed day, but Lazarus (similarly with Jesus himself) did not need to wait for that day! The primary importance is not so much the time that the Lord has chosen but the person of the Lord himself. When Jesus is around, so is resurrection life!

Similarly, going back to the matter of the kingdom, the Pharisees understood, no doubt based on their reading of the Law and Prophets, that the kingdom was to be a visible, world-wide event. However, Jesus explains to them that they missed the most important part. They asked when the kingdom was going to come (Luke 17:20) and Jesus responded by saying that they need not look for signs, because the kingdom of God was already in their midst! (Luke 17:21) Jesus certainly did not mean that there would be no physical manifestation of the kingdom. The next thing Jesus does is tell his disciples about the days of the future appearance of the Son of Man (Luke 17:24-31). No, Jesus was explaining that, while it is certainly true that his kingdom will one day come in full manifestation, the more important fact was that the kingdom belongs to *him*. The Pharisees need not look for any signs, because they were rejecting the very person that the kingdom is all about. With the kingdom there is, as with the matter of resurrection, both an "hour is coming" element, and, because of the Lord's abiding presence, an element of the "is now here."

²⁴ An explanation of the eternal security of the believer would require more than is able to be explained in the present work. For a thorough explanation of the believer's eternally secured position in Christ I would encourage you to read the tract on the subject by John H. Smith found at seekersofchrist.org. (Smith, 2016)

²⁵ Zane Hodges' book *The Hungry Inherit* explains well the distinction that needs to be made between eternal life as a gift and the reward for faithful discipleship. He sees things slightly differently from what I am presenting here, in that he sees the primary distinction as being between kingdom "entrance" (which he takes to be an aspect of the *gift*) and kingdom "inheritance" (which he takes to be an aspect of the *reward*). Hodges teaches that all believers enter the kingdom, but only some will be rewarded with "inheritance" or "ownership" of it. (Hodges, 2011, pp. 81, 110) While I agree that there are distinctions of ownership levels within the coming kingdom, my view, as I articulate in this present work, is that, so far as the millennium is concerned, even *simple entrance* is a reward which genuine believers can still forfeit. Both Hodges and I agree that entrance into the eternal state, the New Jerusalem, is a gift given upon simple faith which cannot thereafter be forfeited.

²⁶ Dillow dedicates a few paragraphs to this concept in his book *Final Destiny: The Future Reign of the Servant Kings (Revised Edition)* (Dillow, 2016, pp. 27, 28). Dillow cites James Barr and his book *The Semantics of Biblical Languages* (Barr, 1961) as his source for the term "illegitimate identity transfer."

²⁷ Bob Wilkin's book *The Ten Most Misunderstood Words in the Bible* does a good job explaining how word confusion plays into Biblical interpretation. While most readers will not be in 100% agreement with all of his conclusions and definitions, I do recommend Mr. Wilkin's work for how well it demonstrates the required contextual and exegetical consideration that must go into scriptural study. (Wilkin B. , 2012)



INTRODUCTION:

KINGDOM BLESSINGS/ PRESENT RESPONSIBILITIES

MATTHEW 5:3-16

Twice in Matthew chapter four Jesus is mentioned as making his proclamation regarding the arrival of the kingdom (Matthew 4:17,26).¹ Jesus' introductory words for the Sermon on the Mount, those profound and paradoxical blessings often referred to as "the beatitudes," also twice make mention of "the kingdom of the heavens." Having discussed what is meant by "the kingdom," we can now look into these specific blessings with which Jesus introduces his sermon and how they relate to his kingdom.

Kingdom Blessings – Matthew 5:3-12

The essentially-future/spiritually-present nature of the kingdom of the heavens was mentioned earlier. It was seen that, in the beatitudes, Jesus speaks of blessings which are somewhat present, but primarily future in their fulfillment. Only the first and the eighth beatitudes are given in the present tense ("theirs *is* the kingdom"), while each of the others are spoken of as being future ("they *will* inherit the earth, they *will* be comforted, etc.).² It will be seen directly that the *time period* for the blessing of these beatitudes will be the future, earthly kingdom of a thousand years (the *millennium*). This again coincides with what has been shown so far: the kingdom is in one sense *present*, but is essentially *future* in its scope.

Present Blessing – Matthew 5:3

“Let the poor in spirit be happy, because the kingdom of the heavens is theirs.”

Matthew 5:3

The first of the beatitudes not only gives an introduction to the beatitudes but really sets the tone for the entire sermon itself. As has been mentioned already, the proclamation of the kingdom had already been made by Jesus. The earlier chapters of Matthew’s gospel tell us that Jesus’ forerunner John the Baptist had made this proclamation as well. Both John and Jesus issued a call to repentance in response to the kingdom’s arrival. The disciples of Jesus were among those who had responded positively to this call. In this sermon, Jesus now gives to these disciples his further instruction regarding that kingdom. This is a crucial point to understand. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is instructing his disciples about the spiritual characteristics of those who will inherit this kingdom. Jesus earlier made the proclamation of the kingdom’s near arrival, now he is teaching his disciples exactly how to get in to the kingdom.

Some within Israel were no doubt looking for their Messiah to be a man of pride and prestige, as many of the Gentile kingdoms’ leaders were. Jesus, however, describes himself as “meek and lowly in heart” (Matthew 11:29). At the outset of his Sermon, Jesus says that those who inherit the kingdom will be of like character with himself. Jesus makes it clear that those who would inherit the heavenly kingdom will not be the aggressive and haughty, but those who, like Jesus himself, can be described as “poor in spirit.”

Remember, the kingdom not only has its future manifestation, but also has its present, spiritual experience. Those submitting to Christ by the Spirit during his absence can be said to be presently experiencing the Lord’s heavenly kingdom. It was only those humble enough to admit and confess their sins that could see their need to accept John’s and Jesus’ call to repentance. Now, in this passage,

Jesus is saying that only those who are emptied of themselves are presently able to abide in the spiritual reality of his heavenly kingdom. All who are not presently “poor” in their own spirit have no room for Jesus to give his Spirit, and thus they are unable to abide under his heavenly ruling. Those who are following Jesus’ example of poverty in spirit, however, are said to be presently possessing the kingdom of the heavens. It is something that is theirs *now*.

Future Blessings – Matthew 5:4-9

All of the “beatitudes” are *kingdom* blessings. Two of them, as we have seen, are blessings that are presently received. However, the remaining seven, judging by the tenses in the Greek, appear to be blessings that Jesus describes as *future* in their fulfillment.

This concept of future reward is in keeping with the future element of the kingdom of the heavens, and is something that Jesus mentions several times throughout the Sermon on the Mount (see Matthew 5:12,19,22,25; 6:6,18,20; 7:21). Jesus sees the time of the disciples’ blessing to be, for the most part, yet future.

Now this concept of a delayed, *future* day of reward may have been difficult for a first century Jew to accept, especially coming from someone who claimed to be the coming Messiah. The understanding that most of the nation of Israel seems to have had regarding the arrival of Messiah was that he would bring with him an *immediate* manifestation of the world-dominating kingdom of Israel as described in Isaiah 2:2-4. It was a stumbling block for some to hear that the current age was instead to be one of suffering and persecution for the faithful. Had not Moses promised to the faithful an abundance of blessings (Deuteronomy 28:1-8)? Did not Moses say of the righteous that the fruit of the womb and of the ground would be blessed, and that their enemies would flee seven ways before them? Indeed Moses did promise these blessings to the nation of Israel, should they remain faithful. Why then does Jesus now speak of *future* blessing, but with present *suffering*? These would be reasonable questions for a first century student of the Law to ask.

Jesus will address these issues in the next section in his teaching (Matthew 5:17-48). There he will describe his own position in relation to the Law given by Moses. Up to this point, however, Jesus simply says that the faithful among *his* disciples will indeed suffer now, but will be rewarded in a future day.

Let's look now at the second beatitude:

**“Let the (ones who are) mourning be happy,
because they will be comforted.”**

Matthew 5:4

Notice first of all that the disciples are not told that they will never mourn. In fact, if they are in the correct spiritual condition, during this age they will, like their master, be people “of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3). But notice that Jesus promises a *future* comfort to them. The Lord will turn the disciples “mourning into joy” and will “comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow” (Jeremiah 31:13). When will this take place? Not in this age, but in the age to come.

The third beatitude likewise carries with it a future kingdom promise:

**“Let the meek be happy, because they will
inherit the earth.”**

Matthew 5:5

Today “the meek” are often scorned and oppressed. Jesus himself, who described himself as “meek and lowly of heart” (Matthew 11:29) was treated this way during his earthly ministry. But just as the meek Jesus will one day return to rule the earth in his millennial kingdom, he here indicates that the meek among his disciples likewise “will inherit the earth.”

When describing the future kingdom, Isaiah says, “The *whole earth* is at rest and quiet” (Isaiah 14:7). Clearly Jesus’ future kingdom will extend over all of the earth. Likewise, in Revelation 5:10 it is said that Jesus’ redeemed people “will reign on the earth.” In this third beatitude, Jesus teaches that an attitude of meekness, reflecting that of the humble Savior himself, is required of his disciples if they intend to reign over the earth, along with him, when he returns in his glory.

**“Let the (ones who are) hungry and thirsting
for righteousness be happy, because they will be
satisfied.”**

Matthew 5:6

The present age is described by the apostle Paul as “the evil day” (Ephesians 6:13). Satan’s present title as the “god of this world” (2 Corinthians 4:4) sadly indicates that righteousness is often now in short supply. In this beatitude, Jesus states that his disciples ought to be hungry and thirsty for righteousness during this present evil day.

However, Jesus does encourage them that they *will be satisfied*. This, too, is a future kingdom promise, since the day of the satisfaction of the righteous will be when Jesus establishes “his government...on the throne of David and over his kingdom,” when he will “uphold it with justice and with righteousness” (Isaiah 9:7). If, Reader, like Lot in Sodom, your soul is vexed by the wickedness of the world around you, then be happy! These are merely the hunger pangs of one who craves righteousness. One day, Jesus promises, your hunger will be satisfied!

**“Let the merciful be happy, because they will
receive mercy.”**

Matthew 5:7

We have mentioned that, in one sense, mercy is shown exclusively on the basis of faith. When discussing the gift of new birth, Jesus never mentions the requirement for mercy or forgiveness on the part of the recipient. Only faith is required for the reception of the free gift of new birth.

However, when discussing the matter of kingdom reward, Jesus makes it clear, here and elsewhere, that it is the merciful who will receive mercy. Forgiveness from God, in this sense, is entirely dependent upon the disciple's forgiveness of others. This matter will be discussed in greater detail once we get to the study of the "Lord's Prayer" (Matthew 6:14 – chapter 4: **Secrecy and Reward**). Suffice it to say, at this point, that it will be during the future, earthly kingdom that this promised mercy will be recompensed to the merciful.

"Let the pure in heart be happy, because they will see God."

Matthew 5:8

The sixth beatitude contains an unspeakably precious promise. In order to grasp Jesus' meaning when he says that the pure in heart will "see God," let's first look at some other scriptures that speak of this concept.

The Old Testament makes it clear that Moses was unique among all the prophets and servants of God. The great men of God, including Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Elijah, David, Isaiah, and Daniel, all received communication from God in the form of visions and dreams. Moses alone was different. When Miriam and Aaron began to speak against humble Moses, the Lord explained to them exactly how special his communion with Moses was. He said, "Hear my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the LORD make myself known to him in a vision; I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, *and he beholds the form of the LORD*. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my

servant Moses?” (Numbers 12:6-8). Likewise, in Deuteronomy 34:10, we read that “there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face.”

Jesus mentions that the pure in heart “will see God.” This reminds us of these descriptions of Moses’ interaction with God. The Lord knew him “face to face,” and Moses is said to have “beheld the form of the Lord.” No doubt it was Moses’ purity of devotion to the Lord that enabled and facilitated this level of intimacy. Recall Moses telling the Lord, “Show me your glory!” The Lord covered Moses with his hand as he walked by, yet allowed Moses to see his back (Exodus 33:18-23). Shortly before this unique event, Moses had confessed to the Lord that he and Israel were helpless without the Lord. Moses pleaded, “If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here” (Exodus 33:15). It was this humble and pure dependence on the Lord that the Lord rewarded with the most intimate relationship with himself.

Likewise, Jesus tells his disciples that it will be the pure in heart who will be rewarded with this kind of intimacy, “seeing God,” in the coming kingdom. We can even say that some will be rewarded with a relationship to the Lord that will exceed even what Moses had. Moses, we are told, was prevented from directly seeing the Lord’s face (Exodus 33:20-22). In 1 John 4:12 we read that “No one has ever seen God.” With regard to the saints’ future, the apostle Paul says that “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9 ESV). In the next age, the level of intimacy with God that awaits the pure in heart will be a face to face fellowship that goes beyond even Moses’ experience of old.

Now, how do we know that it will be during the millennial kingdom that this reward will be received? Well, notice the language Paul uses when he describes the time period when believers are to experience the Lord “face-to-face.” In 1 Corinthians 13:8-12, Paul describes this time as coinciding with the cessation of prophecy: “As

for prophecies, they will pass away...for now we see in a mirror dimly, but then *face to face*" (1 Corinthians 13:8-12 ESV).

The prophet Daniel likewise referred to this time of the cessation of prophecy, and links it to the coming kingdom. Daniel's prophecy was directed toward the nation of Israel, and was given in reference to the "seventy weeks" prophecy. Daniel was told by the angel Gabriel, "Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people...*to seal up vision and prophecy* and to anoint the most holy place" (Daniel 9:24 NASB). Without getting into details, these seventy weeks (or "seventy sevens," that is, "weeks of years") include the entire timeline of God's dealings with the nation of Israel for the remainder of the present age, leading all the way up to the persecution by antichrist. The "Seventy Weeks" finally conclude with the destruction of antichrist by the Lord Jesus at the second advent.³ The only point I wish to emphasize here is that Gabriel made clear to Daniel that prophecy is something that ends once the seventy weeks are completed, *immediately prior to the kingdom of the Messiah*.

Thus, as Gabriel said to Daniel, the time when prophecy is done away is at the introduction of the kingdom age. It is telling that Paul likewise links the cessation of prophecy with the time when the saints will have the opportunity to see the Lord "face to face."

This concept is very logical if you consider it. In this age prophecy is most precious and is to be diligently sought after (1 Corinthians 14:1). While the Lord is physically absent, he speaks to his people through prophecy and through the recorded prophecies of his previous speaking in the scriptures. However, in the next age, when the glorified Lord is present with his people, his speaking by the mouths of prophets will become completely superfluous.

Therefore, each saint who is found worthy will have the relationship with God akin to that of Moses: not like the prophets, who receive dreams and visions (Numbers 12:6,7), but *face-to-face* (Deuteronomy 34:10). Has there ever been a promise given that quite compares with this one? Face-to-face communion with the glorified Lord! This is Jesus' promise to the "pure in heart."

“Let the peace-makers be happy, because they will be called ‘Sons of God.’”

Matthew 5:9

It is interesting that Jesus has this blessing to pronounce regarding men of peace. When God was raising up Samuel to bring about the close of the period of the judges of Israel and to institute the kingly line of David, he began to be called by a unique, new name. In 1 Samuel 1:3, for the first time God is referred to as Jehovah Sabaoth, meaning “LORD of hosts” or “LORD of armies.” Through Samuel, God was about to raise up David as king of Israel, and through him he would establish his presence in Jerusalem. In order to accomplish this purpose, David needed to be a man of warfare, and likewise the Lord revealed himself to be the God of armies. The Lord would, over the course of several years, deliver all of Israel’s enemies into David’s hand.

However, this title of “Lord of armies” seems not to have been the Lord’s most preferred one. The Lord restricted the use of this particular designation (“Lord of armies”) to the period of the kings, when the establishment of his name in the Promised Land was hanging in the balance. Certainly the Lord is willing to utilize warfare when it is necessary to establish his name and to fulfill his promises, but his true heart’s desire is to establish peace. The Lord demonstrated this truth most obviously when David, his beloved servant, expressed his desire to build a house for him. This request deeply touched the Lord’s heart (2 Samuel 7:1-17), but the Lord refused to allow it, instead ordering his house to be built by Solomon, David’s son. The Lord revealed that this order was given expressly because Solomon would be a man of peace rather than of war (1 Chronicles 22:7-10).

Likewise, the Son of God is indeed the “captain of the Lord’s army” (Joshua 5:13-15, Matthew 26:53); yet, when he is to reign in his coming kingdom on earth he will be called the “Prince of peace” (Isaiah 9:6). Likewise, multiple times in the New Testament God is

referred to as “the God of peace” (Romans 15:33; 16:20; Philippians 4:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 13:20). While strife and conflict fill this present evil age, Jesus admonishes his disciples, in the seventh beatitude, to work towards peace. Though peace-makers are often maligned and taken advantage of in today’s world, Jesus explains that, in the coming kingdom age, their character will have procured for them the title of “sons of God.”

The millennial kingdom will be a time of world-wide peace and rest from warfare (Isaiah 2:4; Micah 4:3). This has been the desire of God’s heart for mankind since the creation. While warfare has been at times necessary for the Lord to accomplish his purposes, once this age of peace is established, those whose hearts have likewise been desirous of peace will be rewarded with the acknowledgement that their heart is indeed aligned with God’s.

Present Blessing – Matthew 5:10

As we have seen, most of the blessings, or “beatitudes,” are given in the *future* tense (“they *will* be comforted,” “they *will* inherit the earth,” etc.) Two blessings, though, are given in the *present* tense. The first beatitude is a present blessing for the “poor in spirit.” The other present blessing is found in beatitude number eight:

“Let the (ones who are) persecuted for righteousness be happy, because the kingdom of the heavens is theirs.”

Matthew 5:10

As you can see the eighth beatitude is a blessing on those who are “persecuted for righteousness.” Both the poor in spirit (first beatitude – Matthew 5:3) and the persecuted (here in the eighth) are told, not that the kingdom *will be* theirs, but rather that it *is* theirs. While the other beatitudes refer to the *future* kingdom, the first and the eighth address the *present* experience of the kingdom of the heavens.

In this eighth beatitude, Jesus says that these present possessors of the kingdom will, during this age, be persecuted. Those who would submit to Jesus' heavenly rule are warned that they will be persecuted for the heavenly righteousness that they will possess. The apostle Paul stated the same thing to his closest co-worker: "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). If we, as disciples of Jesus, never experience the rejection or persecution by the world that our master and his first servants received, then we should evaluate to see if there is also, in our lives, a lack of the practical righteousness taught by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus continues this theme of persecution and reward in the final beatitude:

"Happy are you when they revile you and persecute and utter all evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad because your reward is great in the heavens, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Matthew 5:11,12

Jesus pronounces his final blessing upon those who are reviled, persecuted, and slandered for his sake. Such suffering is shown throughout the New Testament to be the expected lot of those who are faithful to the Lord in this age. Jesus encourages his disciples, not that he will always deliver them from suffering for his sake, but that they have a great reward "in the heavens." Jesus makes it clear that there will be a future day of recompense, the day of the kingdom, when those who suffer now will be blessed.

Though the lot of those within his invisible, spiritual kingdom today will be one of suffering in this world, there will be a future day of blessedness and consolation. On the day when the king arrives again, every knee will bow in heaven *and on earth* (Philippians 3:10).

It is at that time that the full manifestation of the heavenly rulership will come to this earth. It is at the commencement of this kingdom that Jesus, the earth's rightful ruler, will "reward each according to his deeds." This will include a special reward to the faithful among his disciples for their willingness to suffer joyfully for his sake.

Present Responsibility – Matthew 5:13-16

We see a shift in emphasis as Jesus moves into the next section of the sermon's introduction. The beatitudes, although two of them touched on the present aspect of the kingdom, stressed primarily the future kingdom reward. In this coming section, however, Jesus shifts his focus in order to emphasize what ought to be the disciples' present experience.

Salt of the Earth – Matthew 5:13

Jesus describes the present age by using two terms: "the earth" and "the world." He tells his disciples that they will relate in certain ways to "the earth" (Matthew 5:13) and in certain ways to "the world" (Matthew 5:14-16). First, the disciples' relationship with "the earth:"

"You are the salt of the earth..."

Matthew 5:13a

Both here and in his discussion concerning the disciples' relationship with "the world," Jesus begins with a statement about the disciples' *position* in relation to the present age, and then he gives a *warning* about the way they ought to relate practically to the present age. Jesus speaks of the disciples' relationship to "the earth" by describing them as "salt."

From the beginning of God's dealings with man, the earth has held a glorious position within his plan. Man is unique among God's creation, as he was made in God's own image. The earth was given to man to be his place of habitation and dominion (Genesis 1:28). As man fulfills his God-given purpose, then the earth will be filled with

the glory of the Lord (Habakkuk 2:14). God has purposed glory for man and, despite man's fall and need for redemption, God still purposes for the earth to be filled with his glory (Romans 3:23, Psalm 57:5).

Mankind is described in the scriptures as *dust*. God created the first man from the dust of the earth (Genesis 2:7), and he often emphasizes mankind's mortality by reminding us that we, in fact, are composed of that which, after a while, returns to the earth from which it came (Genesis 3:19; Ecclesiastes 12:7). Dust, therefore, is a picture of mankind.

It is telling, then, that Jesus describes his disciples as being *salt*. Salt is found among the dust of the earth, indeed salt comes from the earth. Jesus is telling his disciples that they are, in one sense, of like character with the rest of mortal humanity. We are normal people of the earth. We work during the day, we sleep at night. Like everyone else, we have families, friends, and neighbors that we know, love, care about, and otherwise interact with every day. While we are looking for and awaiting a heavenly kingdom, we are still today people *of the earth*. Disciples of Jesus are *salt of the earth*.

“...but if the salt becomes tasteless, with what will it be salted? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men.”

Matthew 5:13b

Having expressed the truth regarding the disciples' position as salt of the earth, Jesus goes on to give an important warning regarding their interaction with the rest of mankind during the course of this age, with the rest of the “dust of the earth.”

Jesus points out that salt is *distinct* among the dust of the earth. Salt has a flavor which sets it apart from everything else that is mined from the earth. Likewise, Jesus says that his disciples must have a

certain *distinctness* among men. Salt is only of value if it is distinct in its flavor. As Jesus says, “If the salt becomes tasteless,” then it is no longer useful, no different from the rest of the dust of the earth.

Just as salt serves many purposes for man, so the disciples are useful to God, so long as they maintain their “saltiness,” or uniqueness among men on the earth. The disciples are warned that if they lose this distinction, this “saltiness,” then they are as useless as the rest of the dust of the earth; good for nothing but to be trampled underfoot by men.

Thus, what we have in this passage is a call to *holiness*. To be “holy” is to be distinct and set-apart. While it is true that Jesus’ disciples are people of the earth, and are, in many ways, people of like nature with everyone else, Jesus says that in another sense they are also very different from everyone else. While the disciples carry on their every-day lives on the earth, they must be careful not to lose this “saltiness,” meaning holiness or distinctness. If they are to be of any use to him in accomplishing God’s purposes, Jesus’ disciples must be noticeably distinct and set-apart from the rest of mankind.

Light of the World – Matthew 5:14-16

Jesus next describes the disciples’ relationship to “the world:”

“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.”

Matthew 5:14

Unlike “the earth,” which generally has a positive connotation in the scriptures, “the world” is normally described negatively, as being something which is at enmity with God. The Lord’s brother James plainly says that “friendship with *the world* is hostility toward God” (James 4:4). Similarly, the apostle John says that anyone who loves the world does not have the love of God in him (1 John 2:15). Jesus elsewhere makes it clear that his disciples are separate from the world (John 15:18,19). With respect to *the earth*, the disciples are actively

involved, but with respect to *the world*, they are separate and uninvolved. Jesus establishes this point by describing the disciples as being “light.” The disciples are noticeably outstanding, like a radiant city on a dark hill. Jesus is essentially saying that his disciples are not ones who will be involved with the world as a system, as the entirety of the world system lies in the power of the evil one (1 John 5:19).

So, again, regarding “the earth,” the disciples are involved and of like nature with the rest of the dust, but regarding “the world,” the disciples are not involved and are of a completely separate spiritual make-up than everyone else. Just like there was when Jesus spoke of the disciples as “salt of the earth,” there is an important warning that accompanies Jesus’ statement that the disciples are the “light of the world:”

“Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a lampstand and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in the heavens.”

Matthew 5:15-16

There is a tendency for those who recognize the fact that they are and ought to be spiritually separate from the world system to also believe that they must also be geographically separate from the rest of mankind. They see that they are light and that the world is darkness, but they tend to put their light “under a bushel.” Jesus warns against this. Jesus says that his disciples are to “shine” the light of righteousness to the world that those who are in the world may see this light and glorify God.

Jesus tells his disciples that they should have an influence on the dark world around them, and the best way for them to do this is for them to unashamedly display the righteousness that God works in and

through them. The apostle Peter makes this same point when telling believers how they are to handle persecution. Similar to what Jesus says in Matthew 5:11,12, Peter tells his readers that those in the outside world will slander them, but he encourages them, “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, *they may see your good works* and glorify God on the day of visitation” (1 Peter 2:12).

It should be noted that this “shining” to the world to which Jesus refers is not primarily an individual matter. The “lamp” describes the individual disciple, but the lamp is not to abide by itself. Rather, it is to be put “on a lampstand” with all of the other lamps. This signifies the believer joining himself to the local assembly (Revelation 1:20). When outsiders observe the righteousness of the church they are said to “glorify God” because it is the church that the apostle Paul prays will be “filled with all the fullness of God.” This is how Paul is able to tell the Philippian believers that, in the midst of a “crooked and twisted generation,” they “shine as lights in the world” (Philippians 2:15). Jesus is making this same point when he says to his disciples, “*You* (plural) are the light of the world.”

With Respect to Persecution

It is no coincidence that both Jesus and Peter speak of the believers influence on the outside world in the immediate context of speaking about the persecution they will receive. Jesus tells his disciples in no uncertain terms that “in the world you will have affliction” (John 16:33). Here he cautions his disciples against falling into one of two potential errors, both of which serve as defense mechanisms against persecution.

Jesus teaches his disciples that they are *both* salt *and* light, and we have seen that along with both of these teachings is a warning. If we look carefully, we will see that the warnings that Jesus gives are really warnings against neglecting the other truth. To understand that disciples are *salt*, yet to ignore that they also are *light*, is for the “salty” believer to “lose his saltiness.” On the other hand, for

disciples to understand that they are *light*, but to forget that they also are *salt*, is for the believer to put his light “under a bushel.” The two truths balance one another. By neglecting either of these commands, a disciple can fall into one of two potential errors.

The first potential error, as we have seen, is the possibility of “losing one’s saltiness.” There is a temptation for those who rightly understand what it means to be the salt of the earth, which is to say that they recognize that they are a part of God’s purpose for the earth that he created, to fail to realize that they are also the “light of the world.” They may become so caught up in earthly affairs that they cease to stand out from those around them. This is what we mean by “losing one’s saltiness.” Often when Christians or even other religious groups overemphasize the need to be involved in the culture and world around them they tend to take on more and more of the characteristics of that culture and world. This may actually be a subconscious defense-mechanism against persecution. Those in the world tend to have more of a disdain for those who stand against what they love and do.

On the other hand, for those who correctly see themselves as the shining city that stands out from the hill, the temptation for them is to fail to see their place as being salt of the earth. It is possible to place such a large emphasis on teachings to be holy and separate from the world that believers can become isolated. This is the error of “placing one’s light under a bushel.” Teaching holiness at the expense of involvement can lead to missing opportunities for believers to fulfill their purpose from God on the earth. This is the other side of the equation, and it too can be a defense mechanism against persecution. The world is less likely to bother with persecuting those who are so uninvolved with them that they are largely irrelevant to them.

It is important to remember that Jesus tells his disciples that they are to be *both salt and light*. They are called to be holy and distinct from others, yet also to be lovingly involved with them. The combination of these two callings on the believer, however, puts him in the position of being vulnerable to persecution and slander. It

should not surprise us, then, when Jesus makes it clear that persecution would be the cost of following after him.

Concerning the Kingdom

Considering the “kingdom” theme of the entire sermon, let’s consider for a moment how these truths regarding persecution and the believers being “salt and light” relate to the coming kingdom. Multiple times in the New Testament the willingness to suffer along with Jesus is mentioned as a criterion for receiving the reward of co-reigning with him in the coming kingdom. In Romans 8:17 Paul states that we as believers are “co-heirs with Christ, if we suffer with him, in order that we also might be co-glorified.” The believer’s kingdom inheritance is conditioned upon his willingness to suffer with Christ. Likewise, in 2 Timothy 2:12 Paul says, “If we endure, we will also co-reign. If we deny him, he will deny us,” and again in Acts 14:22, “Through many afflictions we must enter the kingdom of God.”

Endurance and a willingness to suffer are required from disciples of Jesus if they wish to inherit the coming kingdom. They are also the inevitable result for those who obey Jesus by being both salt and light. To be actively involved in the lives of others, while remaining holy and distinct from them, makes the disciple vulnerable to persecution, but that is what is required for any Christian to receive the reward of reigning with Jesus when he comes in his kingdom.

¹ For a more detailed explanation of the immediate context for the Sermon on the Mount that is provided in Matthew chapter 4, see the Addendum at the end of this work: “Notes on the Sermon’s Context.”

² The ninth and final beatitude (Matthew 5:11,12) technically does not have an expressed verb, but it is usually translated using the present tense (“your reward in heaven *is* great”). However, it can be inferred that the blessing, like all but two of the others, is actually a future one. The present location of the reward is said to be “in heaven,” and is thus awaiting the future day of recompense, at which time it will be given by the Lord to the believer. More will be discussed

concerning the matter of reward later in Matthew 5 (see chapter 3 of this work) and in Matthew 6 (see chapter 4 of this work).

³ The best commentary that I have found regarding this particular prophecy is found in the first volume of G.H. Pember's *The Great Prophecies* series. (Pember, 1998, pp. 185-225)

JESUS' TEACHING AND THE LAW

MATTHEW 5:17-48

Matthew quotes Isaiah chapter nine when introducing Jesus' public ministry (Matthew 4:12-17). In doing so Matthew makes an important distinction between Jesus' ministry and that of John the Baptist. When introducing John's ministry, Matthew referenced Isaiah chapter forty (Matthew 3:1-3). The passage in Isaiah forty refers specifically to the Lord's dealings with his own people, the nation of Israel. This was John's focus. He was to call the nation of Israel to repentance, in light of the coming heavenly kingdom.

In Isaiah nine, however, the focus is shifted somewhat. Rather than specifically calling out the nation of Israel, the prophet references a time when the Gentiles will likewise be ministered to. He says, "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way by the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee *of the Gentiles*- the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned" (Matthew 4:15,16; Isaiah 9:1,2). By quoting this specific prophecy, Matthew indicates that, although Jesus is indeed the Messiah of Israel, his messianic purpose extends beyond simply being a blessing for the Jews. Through Israel's Messiah, God also intends to bless the Gentile nations. Jesus' teaching, as well as the kingdom promises

contained within it, was meant for both the Jews and Gentiles among his disciples.¹

The nation of Israel itself had been constantly reminded that the Gentiles would eventually be blessed along with them. The calling and purpose of the children of Abraham was always that through them “all the nations of the earth (would) be blessed” (Genesis 26:4). Therefore, it is safe to infer that Jesus, as the Christ, or the Messiah of Israel, will bring with him blessings not for Israel only, but for all the nations of the earth.

With all of that having been said, however, it must also be pointed out that Jesus’ teaching, at least at this point during his ministry, was still very “Jewish,” at least in one respect. Although as the Messiah he will be a blessing that will eventually reach all nations, Jesus firstly came for the nation of Israel itself. The apostle John, in his gospel, says that Jesus “came to his own,” referring his own nation (John 1:11). Later in his gospel Matthew will describe a Canaanite woman, a Gentile, who comes to him asking for deliverance for her daughter from demonic oppression. Jesus responds to her pleadings for help by saying, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Upon further pleading Jesus replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” (Matthew 15:22-26). Jesus was *Israel’s* Messiah. The first task given to him by his Father was the offering of himself and his kingdom to his own people, the Jews. In this way they might finally fulfill the purpose that God has for them and through them.

Sadly, a reading of all four gospel accounts will show that Jesus will eventually be rejected in large part by his own people. John’s gospel says that Jesus “came to his own”, but it then goes on to say that “his own did not receive him” (John 1:11). Jesus marveled at his hometown (Mark 6:6) and lamented over Jerusalem (Matthew 23:37,38) because of the unbelief of his own nation. There came a point in Jesus’ ministry where, because of his own people’s rejection of him, he began to open up his ministry more directly to the Gentiles. To extend Jesus’ parable from Matthew 15:22-28, with “the children”

despising their own bread, Jesus began to allow “the dogs” to eat. By chapter eleven of Matthew’s gospel Jesus had performed many miraculous signs, but had seen little repentance on the part of his own people. His response to this was to offer himself to any and all who would come to him (Matthew 11:28).

Unfortunately for the nation of Israel, the arrival of the physical, national messianic kingdom became impossible at that time because of their rejection of Jesus as Messiah. However, the Messiah himself was still able to offer the *spiritual* aspect of the kingdom to whomever would accept him. Thus Jesus, as the true seed of Abraham, would, for now primarily in a spiritual sense, begin to fulfill the promise made to his father Abraham by becoming a blessing to all the nations.

However, at the point in Jesus’ ministry when he was delivering the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had not yet moved on from the offering of himself to his own nation. While his teaching is indeed applicable and binding on his disciples from all nations (Matthew 28:20), there is still a discernible Jewish background behind what he teaches the twelve disciples on the mount.

Law and Prophets

The phrase “the Law and the Prophets” is found twice in the sermon, once at the beginning of the teaching (Matthew 5:17) and once at the end (Matthew 7:12), showing that Jesus’ teaching is very much related to that which was previously given to Israel by Moses. In fact, these two uses of the phrase “Law and Prophets” can be viewed as “bookends,” for Jesus’ ethical teachings. Everything in Matthew 5 that is said prior to the phrase “Law and Prophets” can be viewed as words of introduction, and everything following the phrase in Matthew 7 can be viewed as words of conclusion. The twelve were themselves all Jewish, remember, so it makes sense that Jesus’ instruction is deliberately given within the context of Israel’s Law and Prophets.

In this first section of the Sermon on the Mount, this Jewish element is especially evident. In this first section, the bit following the introductory words, Jesus will bring several new teachings, each of them being presented as a *direct comparison to something said in the Law of Moses* (Matthew 5:21-48). Considering the fact that Jesus is *Israel's* Messiah, it is only logical that it would be incumbent upon him to address what had previously been given by God to the nation of Israel. Prior to the coming of Jesus, God had primarily spoken to his people in two ways. Firstly, God gave Israel the *Law* through Moses, and secondly he spoke through the mouths of the prophets. Therefore, when he wishes to refer to the totality of God's Old Testament word to Israel, Jesus uses the expression "the Law and Prophets." Jesus starts this section of the Sermon on the Mount with a brief overview describing how exactly he relates to Israel's "Law and Prophets."

*Overview: Not Abolishing, but Fulfilling –
Matthew 5:17-20*

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot will pass from the Law until all is accomplished."

Matthew 5:17,18

In giving this overview of his position in relation to the Law, Jesus preempts two possible errors in understanding regarding what his position is.

Not Abolishing

Firstly, Jesus says that he has not come to “abolish” the Law or the Prophets. The Greek word here translated “abolish” means literally “to destroy” (καταλύω: see its use in Matthew 26:21; Romans 14:20). The error that Jesus is warning against is seeing him as one who is in opposition to the God of Moses and who would “destroy” that which he gave. It seems that some early heretical sects held to views such as this, seeing Jesus as serving a god antagonistic to God the creator.² Jesus makes it clear that he is the Son of God, and that God his Father is none other than the God of Israel. Jesus has no intention of tearing down what was given by God previously. In fact, he declares that the Law will remain in its entirety until the time when heaven and earth are also destroyed.

Fulfilling, Not Interpreting

Thankfully, most throughout church history have rightly rejected the view that Jesus is out to destroy what was given by the God of Moses. Christians have avoided falling into the error of some of the early heretical sects. Sadly, the same cannot be said regarding the other error that Jesus warns against.

The second error that Jesus would have his disciples guard against is addressed in his statement that he has come “to fulfill.” The Greek word translated “fulfill” is usually used in reference to the fulfillment of prophecy, or generally to mean “to finish,” “to complete,” or “to accomplish” (See its use in Philippians 2:2). Unfortunately, many throughout Church history have wrongly considered Jesus’ words to be no more than a *clarifying* or *interpreting* of what Moses had said previously. Within the Reformed tradition, both John Calvin³ and Matthew Henry⁴ say in their commentaries on the Sermon on the Mount that the Lord was correcting Pharisaical misinterpretations of the Law. Likewise, some today teach that there was really no new or different teaching given by Jesus in the sermon. Coming from a dispensational perspective, Louis A. Barbieri Jr., in Dallas Theological Seminary’s *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, similarly sees

Jesus as merely correcting his listeners for seeking after the righteousness of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law.⁵

While it is true that Jesus does mention the *behavior* of the scribes and Pharisees as a negative example (Matthew 5:20; 6:2,5,16), these commentators fail to notice that Jesus mentions nothing at all of the *teaching* of the Pharisees throughout the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is not simply the best in a long line of scribes interpreting the Law. We make a grave mistake if we assume that, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is simply correcting wrong interpretations and offering clarifications of the Mosaic Law.⁶ Jesus declares that he is himself the end toward which the Law and Prophets were moving. The Law is *accomplished* in him. This is a crucial point to understand if someone wants to properly understand Jesus' teaching. Jesus was not *interpreting* the Law; Jesus was *finishing* the Law. The difference between these two is crucial. The crowds are specifically said to have noticed that Jesus spoke "not as the scribes." His teaching was that of one "with authority," different than those who spoke simply as scribes of the Law (Matthew 7:29). Jesus did not speak as though he were a student of Moses, nor even as Moses' peer. Jesus said that Moses was simply preparing the way for him.

It is also possible that, in claiming that he fulfills the Law, Jesus is making a reference to Deuteronomy 18:15. Let me explain what I mean.

If there is one point that the Law made very clear it was that Moses was a unique individual within God's plan. Deuteronomy 34:10 says, "There has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face." However, Moses himself predicted a time when a prophet *like him* would arise, and said emphatically that Israel was to listen to him. Jesus, in saying that he is "the fulfilment" of the Law, is claiming that he is himself the prophet thus predicted.

The similarities between Moses on Sinai and Jesus on the mount are obvious. Both Moses and Jesus ascended the mountain. Both of them brought about new, profound teaching. Both brought about

change that will never be undone. Most importantly, both Jesus and Moses spoke with the authority of God.

There is one important difference between the teaching of Moses and Jesus, however, and that is in the *origin* of the authority with which they spoke. Moses ascended the mountain alone, received the Law on tablets of stone, and having come down, spoke only what was given him by God. From that point onward, in order for a person to assume to speak with God's authority, unless they were claiming to have direct revelation from God by using the phrase, "Thus says the Lord," they would refer to what was given previously to Moses by declaring, "It is written..."

Jesus, however, uses neither of these phrases. Jesus' claim was not "it is written," nor was it "thus says the LORD." Rather, Jesus' claim was the simple phrase "*I say to you...*" Do you see the subtle, yet infinitely profound difference? The authority that Moses possessed was by virtue of his communication from God. Jesus speaks as though he has that same authority simply by virtue of being himself. While Moses spoke a message *from* God, Jesus spoke *as* God. It is no wonder that the crowds were astonished at the authority with which he taught (Matthew 7:28,29).

How Completed yet not Abolished?

Now, if we understand Jesus correctly, he claims that the Law yet abides, nevertheless it is completed in him (5:17). So what exactly does this mean? How can something that "abides" be "completed"? In what sense does the Law remain? In what sense is the Law finished?

In order to answer these questions let's try to gain some insight by looking briefly into the apostle Paul's letter to the Romans. In describing the Jews who disobey the Law, Paul says, "All who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law" (Romans 2:12). He makes the case in no uncertain terms that Israel has failed to keep the Law that was given to her, and thus she now stands condemned by that Law. Some would like to say that the coming of the Christ

removes this condemnation for Israel. Jesus disagrees. Jesus makes it clear that the Law *remains*, and thus, it must continue to judge and condemn those under it who do not keep its commands.

If the Law yet remains, in what sense, then, did Jesus the Christ “fulfill” or complete the Law? Turning again to the apostle Paul’s words in Romans, Paul explains that “Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (Romans 10:4). The apostle tells those who trust Christ that “you also have died to the law through the body of Christ” (Romans 7:4). To establish this point Paul makes an illustration from the Law concerning marriage. So long as both partners in a marriage are alive, the Law of marriage is binding. If one partner dies, however, then the other is free to marry someone else. Likewise, the Law abides (Matthew 5:18), but those who by faith are united to the Christ, have themselves died, died with Christ (Romans 6:5; 7:2-4, Galatians 2:20). Thus, any Jew who rejects Jesus as the Christ is “still alive,” and thus still abides under the condemnation of the Law. Jesus did not come to “abolish” the Law. However, those who are united to the Christ by faith are, because of Jesus’ death and resurrection (and thus their co-death and co-resurrection with him), “not under Law, but under grace” (Romans 6:14). So for those who by faith are “in Christ,” they are freed from the Law just as Jesus is. Because of this fact, Paul says that “the righteousness of God has now been manifested *apart from the Law*” (Romans 3:21).

In summary, Jesus did not come to abolish the Law, and therefore the Law yet abides and condemns. But Jesus did come to “fulfill” or “finish” the Law, and thus the Law has no judgment or condemnation for those who are, by faith, united to him.

Other Senses of “Fulfilment”

There is another respect in which Jesus “fulfilled” the Law as well. Remember, to “fulfill” not only means “to finish” but also “to complete.” We have seen how Jesus “finished” the Law, but there is also a sense in which he “completed” the Law.

Remember in Romans 3:21 when Paul says, "The righteousness of God has now been manifested apart from the Law"? Well he went on to say that "the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it." The Law itself prophesied that one day a Messiah would come and that this Messiah would accomplish God's purpose for Israel. Israel failed to obey the Law, and thus they failed to accomplish the righteousness of God. But where Israel failed under the Law, the Messiah will succeed apart from the Law. The Law itself speaks about this coming Messiah and his purpose-fulfilling work. So in this respect, Jesus' coming to die and be raised, thus freeing men from the Law, was in itself also a "fulfilment" of the Law, in that it was a completion of the prophecy given in the Law.

There is yet another sense in which Jesus "completed" the Law, and this one is a bit more controversial. As we go through the Sermon on the Mount, we will find that Jesus addresses certain *deficiencies* in the Law, in that it comes short of the fullness of the righteousness of God. We will point these instances out as we come to them, but for an example I will point out one occasion from outside the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus addressed a deficiency in the Law as revealed through Moses.

Later in his ministry Jesus will describe a concession that Moses had made within the Law concerning the Law of marriage (Matthew 19:8,9). Jesus makes it clear that divorce was given as a concession because of the hardness of men's hearts. If a man ceased to care for his wife, the poor woman would be in the position of a widow, since she would not be able to marry another man without committing adultery. Because hard-hearted men were doing this, God, through Moses, permitted divorce so that the abandoned woman would be legally free to marry another man.⁷ Of course this situation differed from God's original plan for marriage. Jesus, by his own teaching, removes the concession and restores God's original idea (Matthew 19:9; Mark 10:11; Luke 16:18). In the Sermon on the Mount as well, there are items in the Law of Moses from which Jesus now differs in his own teaching.

I am well aware that this concept will be strange for some Christians to hear, but the Mosaic Law, while indeed given to the nation of Israel by God for specific purposes, did not in itself reveal the *entirety* of God's standard of righteousness. Primarily, the Law was given for the purpose of governing the nation. The fleshly children of Israel needed a civil government that would guard them until the appointed time for the appearing of the Messiah.⁸ Through this Law God would be able to preserve a lineage that could one day bring about the Christ, the One who himself *would* display the entirety of God's standard. But because the Law was governing a *fleshly* people, it was not able to display the fullness of God's righteousness, the way that it can be expressed by a *spiritual* people. This is why Jesus' new commands "complete" or "fulfill" what was spoken previously. Jesus, in saying that he "fulfills the Law," is saying, along with the other things mentioned, that the righteousness that he now teaches will serve to complete what was lacking in the Law of Moses.

Kingdom Position

So Jesus has just explained what is the proper understanding of his position as the Christ in relationship to the Law. Before going into his own teaching by comparing it to the Law, Jesus touches again on the "kingdom" theme of his sermon. Jesus gives a brief explanation of how his disciples' response to his teaching will affect their position in respect to the coming kingdom.

"These Commandments"

"Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same..."

Matthew 5:19a

Contrary to what many commentators say, when Jesus warns against “relaxing” one of the least of “these commandments” he is referring to the commands *that he himself is about to give*, and not to the Ten Commandments or to anything else from the Law of Moses. Jesus uses the near demonstrative “*these*” (Greek: οὗτος), where he would likely have used the far demonstrative “*those*” (Greek: ἐκεῖνος) had he been referring to the commandments given centuries earlier.

Also, remember what Jesus had just said about his “fulfilling” of the Law. The lower, less-complete righteousness of the Law had to do with preserving the nation *until the Christ would arrive*. This new teaching that Jesus is about to bring, not the Law of Moses, is what truly prepares one for the heavenly kingdom. We must not overlook the fact that, in conjunction with the theme of the entire sermon, the warning that Jesus gives to his disciples has all to do with their position within the coming “kingdom of the heavens.”

Jesus refers to the “relaxing” of these commandments as affecting one’s position within the kingdom of the heavens (see Matthew 5:19b). If we look at this fact in light of Jesus’ discussion of John the Baptist in Matthew chapter eleven, we will find indisputable evidence that, by “these commandments,” Jesus is referring to his *own teaching*, rather than to anything from the Old Testament.

Notice Jesus’ words in Matthew 11:11. In that passage Jesus said, “Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen *no one greater than John the Baptist...*” This is important to notice. None had arisen under the Law who was greater than John the Baptist. Of all the Old Covenant servants of God, none could surpass John. It goes without saying, then, that John never taught to “loosen” or “relax” any teaching *from the Law*. Therefore, if Jesus is saying that keeping and teaching commands *from the Law* is what secures a person with a great position in the kingdom of the heavens, then John’s position would be the absolute greatest! But what does Jesus say? If we read on in that same verse we find that Jesus says, referring to John the Baptist, that “the one who is *least in the kingdom of the heavens is greater than he*.” Do you see the point? The

absolute pinnacle of righteousness gained under the Law (namely: that of John the Baptist) was *inferior* to the least acceptable righteousness necessary for entrance into the kingdom.

Of course I do not say this to demean John the Baptist in any way, nor do I mean to imply that John himself will not be rewarded with entrance into the kingdom in the future. My point is that the teaching that Jesus is about to bring is on an entirely new and different plane from that which was given previously. Jesus' is a heavenly righteousness, higher than anything ever given to earthly men, higher even than the Law of Moses! Therefore, if what Jesus refers to as "these commandments" here in Matthew 5:19 are also said to affect one's position *within the kingdom*, they cannot refer to anything of the Old Covenant, since even the standard of John the Baptist, the greatest of all during the period of Law, is below the least in the kingdom of the heavens.

Least in the Kingdom

"...will be called least in the kingdom of the heavens."

Matthew 5:19b

Now, within the explanation that he is giving here, Jesus speaks of three positions which relate to the coming kingdom. Each position, by clear implication, is potentially inherited by a disciple of the Lord by virtue of his response to Jesus' teaching.

Firstly Jesus refers to one who "will be called least in the kingdom of the heavens." The disciple here described by Jesus is one who attempts to "relax" (Greek: "loose") any of Jesus' commands. This is a person who, although he will be present in the kingdom, his position will be low. He will not be among those who are said to "reign with Christ" (Revelation 20:4) during the thousand year period, but neither will he be among those who are "cast out" (Luke 13:28). Jesus says that this inferior position will be for those who tend to *soften* his

words for themselves and for others. Jesus will later warn against taking “the broad way” of easier interpretation of his teaching (7:13). The one who takes this way will have his position lessened in the coming kingdom.

Great in the Kingdom

“But whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of the heavens.”

Matthew 5:19c

Secondly Jesus describes one who does what Jesus teaches, and then instructs others to do so as well. Jesus says that this one’s position will be “great in the kingdom.” The original twelve disciples will later be instructed, not only to make disciples of all nations, but also to *teach* them to obey everything that Jesus commanded (Matthew 28:20). Much of our New Testament is made up of some of these same original disciples doing exactly that: teaching others to obey what Jesus taught. It should be no surprise, then, when we find out later that Jesus will tell these disciples that their position in the next age will indeed be great. Jesus said of the original twelve that they will “sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matthew 19:28). Just as was the case with the original twelve, each disciple of Jesus who both keeps Jesus’ commands and instructs others in those commands will have a great position, co-ruling with Jesus in his kingdom when it comes.

Will not Enter the Kingdom

“For I say to you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of the heavens.”

Matthew 5:20

Lastly Jesus describes those whose righteousness never reaches the level necessary for them to even enter the kingdom of the heavens. He uses the scribes and Pharisees as an example of the kind of righteousness that falls short of the lowest standard required for entrance into the kingdom.

To an unlearned observer this assessment of the scribes and Pharisees would have been difficult to understand. From an outside perspective, these religious rulers appeared to be the most righteous of everyone in Israel. How then could their example be below the minimum requirement for the kingdom? It is just here that an understanding of the present, *spiritual* aspect of the heavenly kingdom becomes necessary.

By saying earlier that the “poor in spirit” possess the kingdom of the heavens *presently* (Matthew 5:3), Jesus has shown that God’s heavenly rulership has already been taken hold of in one sense. Though the blessings of “seeing God,” “being satisfied,” and “inheriting the earth” all await their future fulfilment (Matthew 5:4-9), of the poor in spirit Jesus says that “theirs *is* the kingdom.” The kingdom *presently exists* as a spiritual reality, and it is only those who are emptied of themselves, those who are “poor” in their own spirit, who experience it. This is why the scribes and Pharisees are the perfect non-example. Those who, because of their own pride, do not presently abide under the rulership of God by his Spirit cannot be considered as having “entered the kingdom” in spiritual reality today. The righteousness of a prideful person can, at best, be a human, fleshly righteousness; a righteousness of *law*. The righteousness required for the kingdom, however, must be a different one, a higher one; a righteousness which comes only from the power of the Holy Spirit of God.

In one sense, all who believe have been transferred by God from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of his beloved Son (Colossians 1:12). Thus we can say that, in a *positional* sense, all believers have already entered the present, spiritual aspect of the kingdom. What Jesus is saying here, however, is that there is a

required standard of *experiential* righteousness necessary for entrance into the coming kingdom when it is manifested upon the earth. Those who have not made a practice of spiritually abiding under the heavenly rule in this age, should not expect any inheritance in the kingdom when it comes in full manifestation. A disciple whose righteousness never goes beyond the carnal observation of the letter of the Law, following the pattern of the scribes and Pharisees, has never begun to abide under the heavenly authority. This disciple, one who has not learned to be spiritually governed directly by his Father in heaven, does not live in the spiritual reality of the present heavenly kingdom, and he should not expect the reward of an inheritance in, nor even simple entrance into, the kingdom when it is manifested on the earth in the future.⁹

These two aspects of the kingdom, the present, *spiritual* aspect, and the future *manifestation* aspect, are placed side by side by Jesus in Matthew 24:45-47. Jesus says, "Who then is the faithful and wise slave whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master *will find so doing when he comes*. Truly I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions."

In the above parable we have the kingdom described as a "household." The master is said to set the faithful and wise slave "over all his possessions." Here we have the future "household:" the coming millennial kingdom. The master (picturing the Lord Jesus) rewards his servants (the disciples) with co-ownership of his possessions. No doubt this pictures Jesus rewarding his disciples with rulership (and stewardship) in the future, manifest kingdom. To whom, though, does the master award this privilege? It is to those who are already presently serving in "the household" when he comes. Here is the present "household:" the spiritual kingdom, the church. The disciple's serving of his Lord during this day of the invisible, "spiritual" kingdom is what earns his position in the manifest kingdom that is yet to come.¹⁰

Comparison of Jesus' Teaching With the Law – Matthew 5:21-48

As we get deeper into this section about Jesus' teaching and the Law, we will see Jesus using some of the content of the Law to provide a contrast for what he is now teaching his own disciples. The disciples of Jesus are a unique group of people. While they were originally composed only of Jews, after Jesus' resurrection they will be composed of both Jews and Gentiles (Matthew 28:19). More importantly, as opposed to the Old Testament Israelites, the disciples are a people whose blessings are said to await the future kingdom to be finally meted out. Because of the unique status of this group of people, the Law of Moses, while perfect in its content for whom it was given (namely the nation of Israel until the coming of the Christ), is simply not suitable for them. Israel was a people of the *flesh*; Jesus' disciples are a people of the *spirit*. Israel's promises were *earthly*; these disciples' promises are *heavenly*. Because of these things, the teaching of Jesus is able to be higher, deeper, and even at times directly *different* from what was given through Moses at Sinai.

As stated earlier, many might take issue with the idea that Jesus was *contrasting* his teaching with the Law itself. It is common for Bible teachers and commentators to state that Jesus was disputing with some contemporary ideas (perhaps those of the Pharisees) who were misinterpreting what the Law had really said. Many believe that if Jesus were to bring any new teaching, something different than what was given through Moses, then there would be a contradiction with God and a lack of continuity between the Old and New Testaments. The reformer John Calvin takes such a view.¹¹ In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin says that for one to assume that Jesus taught anything different than what was given in the Law, he would "make God contradict himself, by approving and commanding at one time, what he afterward prohibits and condemns."¹² The problem with Calvin's view is in his use of the phrase "at one time." That's just the point. With the Messiah having

come, it is not the same “time” as it was under the Law. With the coming of the Christ and the giving of the Holy Spirit, things have changed. Calvin’s logic is faulty and, more importantly, he disregards the plain reading of the text.

As far as the text is concerned, Jesus does not say, “You are hearing many moderns claim...” Rather he says, “You have heard that *the ancients* were told.” Jesus does not then go on to quote the Pharisees or any modern scribe, but rather to quote from the Law itself. Each point that Jesus refers to the ancients as having been told is either a direct quote from the Law (“You shall not murder,” “You shall not commit adultery,” “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”) or is a fair paraphrase of a teaching found in the Law. To claim that these phrases imply some Pharisaical misconstruing of what was truly given by Moses is to read into the text something that is simply not there.

It is true that Jesus elsewhere does in fact rebuke the Pharisees for their mishandling of the Law. When he does this, however, Jesus does not mince words. He makes very clear what he is doing, and he directs his rebuke directly to the Pharisees themselves (see Matthew 23:13-36). In those instances, one could say that Jesus was acting as a scribe correcting other scribes. The teaching in Matthew 5-7, however, is very different. He is not here speaking as a scribe, but as one with his *own authority*. It is precisely because of this authority with which he spoke, different from a scribe, that Jesus astonished the crowds with his teaching (Matthew 7:28,29).

Back to Calvin’s logical point. Why does Jesus’ teaching not qualify as “destroying” the Law? If Jesus is bringing new teaching, sometimes differing distinctly from the Law of Moses, how then does this not make Jesus opposed to the God who gave that Law to Moses?

To answer quite simply, Jesus is free to bring a new teaching now because it was he who gave the Law in the first place! More than once Jesus claimed himself to be one and the same as the “I AM” who spoke to Moses (John 8:24,58,59). As the situation changes, the Lord is free to bring new teaching to fulfill a new purpose. The Law

was given by the Lord for a specific purpose: to guard and preserve the nation of Israel until the coming of the Christ (Galatians 3:24). The ordinances of the Law were designed to govern a race and a nation; a *fleshly* people. Now that Jesus the Christ has arrived, making available the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, he is perfectly free to bring new teaching to govern this new *spiritual* people. The teaching of the Law was good, and if obeyed it brought earthly blessings to an earthly people (Deuteronomy 28:4,5). But Jesus now speaks of a kingdom that is “of the heavens,” and thus requires teaching on a much higher plane.

For illustration, imagine there is a man who has two young sons. Let’s call the man “Marvin.” Now imagine Marvin makes a house rule. He sits his two sons down and tells them, “From now on, you boys are not allowed to play in the front yard. The traffic in our neighborhood is increasing and I don’t want you to get hit by a car. If you want to play outside, then you are only allowed to be in the backyard.” As the boys grow older, the rule is consistently enforced and the boys are prevented from playing in the front yard.

Now, let’s say when Jordan, the older of the boys, reaches a certain age, Marvin decides that it is time for Jordan to take some responsibility around the house. Marvin tells Jordan that every Tuesday he is to take the garbage can out to the road, in order for the trash to be collected. Now imagine that Jordan objects saying, “But Dad, I can’t! This is in clear violation of our standing rule against front yard activities!”

I ask you, is Jordan’s objection valid? Is Marvin, as a result of the previous rule that he made, disallowed from making a new, different rule? Of course not! Marvin, the father, is the one who gave the original rule its authority. Surely, then, he can use that same authority to bring about this new instruction. Similarly, the Lord God gave the Law to a specific people for a specific purpose. Jesus, being Lord, has every right to bring teaching that, based on the existence of a new people and a new situation, supersedes what was given before.

Continuing even further with the illustration, note also that Marvin does not necessarily have to abolish the former rule in order to make way for the new one. If Clint, the younger brother, should decide to play in the front yard, he would still be in violation of the original rule. Similarly, Jesus, though giving a new and different set of commands for his new people, does not abolish the old Law for the nation of Israel. If a Jew has not been “freed from the Law” through faith in Christ, then he is still under the Law. He will still be judged by any short-coming of perfect adherence to the entirety of that Law.

So, in summary, Jesus leaves the Law there as a means of condemnation for those who are under it. However, he freely justifies all those who, by faith, are united to him and thus freed from the Law. This new people, those not under the Law but under the grace of God, now have laid before them the potential to receive the reward of co-rulership with Jesus in the millennial kingdom. The teaching Jesus gives in the Sermon on the Mount summarizes his righteous criteria for these born-again believers to receive this reward. Jesus begins laying out this standard of righteousness by making comparisons between his teaching and that of the Law given by Moses.

Concerning Murder – Matthew 5:21-26

**“You have heard that it was said to the ancients,
‘You shall not murder’ and ‘whoever murders
will be liable to judgment.’”**

Matthew 5:21

Jesus begins the comparison of his own teaching with what was given through Moses by addressing the Law’s prohibition against murder.

Jesus quotes the Law from what is probably its most famous section: the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments’ prohibition against murder is found both in Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17. Jesus quotes both of those passages verbatim: “You shall not murder.”

Jesus then goes on to summarize what the Law says regarding how a murderer ought to be dealt with. Jesus refers to the Law as saying that “whoever murders will be liable to judgment.” Jesus is not addressing any pharisaical misconstruing of the Law. No, this is a fair summary of what is said in Deuteronomy 19. When someone had killed someone else, whether intentionally or unintentionally, “the avenger of blood” (Deuteronomy 19:6, probably a family member of the deceased) would pursue the manslayer in order to avenge the death. The killer would flee to one of three refuge cities where he would be tried for the crime. If the death was found to be accidental, the killer would be exonerated. If the death was intentional, the murderer would be killed (see Deuteronomy 19:1-11). In other words, according to the Law, “Whoever murders will be liable to judgment.”

**“But I say to you that everyone who is angry
with his brother will be liable to judgment;”**

Matthew 5:22a

Jesus here brings a teaching that goes well beyond what was given through Moses. Firstly, unlike the Law, which brought no judgment until a physical death occurred, Jesus warns that, for his disciples, there will be a future judgment even of their *attitude* toward their brethren. Jesus tells his disciples that, like the manslayer under the Law, whoever is angry with his brother will be “liable to judgment.” The judgment spoken of here is certainly the coming Judgment Seat of Christ, before which Paul says all who follow Jesus will appear (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Notice that Jesus does not say that the disciple who is angry with his brother will necessarily be found *guilty*, only that he will be liable to judgment. It is possible to be angry, yet without sin (Ephesians 4:26). It could be argued that Jesus himself was angry, even with believers, at times. Certainly he was angry with those abusing the temple (John 2:14-16). He was also amazed at the stubborn unbelief

of his hometown (Mark 6:4-6), and even became frustrated with the weakness of the faith of his disciples (Matthew 16:8). Thus, it is clear that there is such a thing as being vindicated in one's anger, and just like the manslayer under the Law, an angry believer might be exonerated by his Judge.

However, James 1:20 warns us that "the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God." God, in his perfect righteousness, does, at times, get angry. When a man's anger is in accord with the righteous anger of God, then the anger is righteous and the man is vindicated. However, when it is simply the "anger of man," not having its origin in God, it produces sin.

Compare, for example, Moses' anger at Mount Sinai with his anger at Meribah. When Moses came down from Sinai and saw the idolatry of the people of Israel in making the golden calf, it is said that his "anger burned hot" (Exodus 32:19). Moses, in his fury, shattered the tablets containing the words of God. He then (almost unbelievably) ground the idol into dust, scattered the gold dust into the people's water, and forced them to drink it! Now, I have been angry before in my life, but I can't imagine being so "burning hot" so as to force an entire nation of people to *drink* the golden statue they had just made. Imagine the wrath that Moses exhibited in this story. Nevertheless, as we read further into the chapter we find that Moses' anger was in agreement with the Lord. He was not in sin, because his anger was not "the wrath of man," but was a zeal for the holiness and glory of the Lord. We read that the Lord completely vindicates Moses' anger (Exodus 32:30-35).

However, the story is much different at Meribah. When the Israelites were quarrelling with Moses about their lack of water, Moses again grew angry, but this time in a different way. This time Moses' anger was in defense of *himself* rather than of God. The Lord's desire was to provide water for his thirsty people, so he simply told Moses, "Speak to the rock...and it will yield its water" (Numbers 20:8). But Moses, no doubt due to his anger against the people, defied the Lord's command. Moses struck the rock twice rather than

simply speaking to it, while saying to the people, “Hear now, you rebels! Shall we bring water for you out of this rock?!” (Numbers 20:10,11). Not only did Moses’ human anger cause him to disobey the Lord’s command, but he misrepresented the Lord before the people. He implicated the Lord in his own personal wrath by saying that it was “we” (himself and the Lord) who were miraculously bringing forth the water from the rock. The Lord told Moses that, in doing this, he had given a false and unholy representation of God before the people of Israel. It was this event, Moses’ self-centered anger and misrepresentation of the Lord, that prevented him from entering into the Promised Land (Numbers 20:12).

This story should give us some insight into why Jesus gives such a stern warning regarding anger. The anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God, and when we, as Jesus’ disciples, stand before him in judgment, even the innermost purposes of our hearts will be judged.

“Whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ will be liable to the council;”

Matthew 5:22b

“Raca” is an Aramaic insult meaning “worthless.” It is important to notice that Jesus rebukes the one who says this *to his brother*.¹³ To call anyone who is genuinely a brother or sister “worthless” is slanderous. It is tremendously destructive and discouraging for a disciple of Jesus to speak this way about a fellow believer, especially since none of the redeemed are without eternal value to the Lord.

The slanderous nature of this insult is why Jesus compares its judgment to being brought before “the council” or “the Sanhedrin.” The Sanhedrin was a higher court in Israel before which only those already found guilty of a crime would be taken. So, in other words, while Jesus’ disciples will be judged as to whether or not their anger against a brother is justified, should their anger result in the calling of

one of their brothers “worthless,” then on some level the disciple is already guilty.

“And whoever says, ‘Moreh!’ will be liable to the fiery Gehenna.”

Matthew 5:22c

Finally Jesus addresses a disciple saying “Moreh!” This most likely is also in reference to slandering a brother. While most translations render this word “Moreh” as “fool” as would be correct if it were a Greek word, it probably is also from the Aramaic, just as “Raca” is from the Aramaic. If this is the case, then saying to a brother “Moreh” is an even graver insult than is saying “Raca.” “Moreh,” in the Aramaic, means “rebel.” It is a serious offense to accuse a brother of being useless to God, but it is worse still to imply that a brother is in fact *at enmity* with God.

Throughout the Old Testament scriptures there are numerous occasions of men being called “fool” and “worthless fellow” (Psalm 14:1; Isaiah 19:13; 1 Samuel 25:25; Proverbs 6:12). Those not following the precepts of the Law were at times rightly categorized as being “worthless.” There were only a few occasions, however, where anyone was called a “rebel.” One such case is when Moses said of Korah that he and his men “despised the LORD” (Numbers 16:30). This was a most serious accusation, and it was proven true by the Lord’s causing the earth to swallow up Korah and those who followed in his rebellion (Numbers 16:32).

However, as we have seen in Numbers 20:10-13, there was another angry accusation by Moses that was not vindicated by the Lord. At Meribah Moses’ anger burned against the assembly of Israel and he said to them, “Hear now, you rebels!” He then struck the rock that was to produce water for the people instead of simply speaking to it as he was told to do. We saw earlier that Moses’ attitude was not in agreement with the Lord’s. Do not underestimate the seriousness of this offense! The Israelites were simply in a quarrel *with Moses*, but

Moses accused them of being at enmity *with the Lord*! For this false accusation and misplaced anger Moses missed out on the opportunity to bring Israel into the Promised Land. The Lord took Moses' offense seriously and disciplined him accordingly. The same holds true for Jesus' dealing with his disciples when they slanderously call their brother "rebel!"

While Jesus has spoken of judgments that his hearers were familiar with and related them to his own future judgment over his disciples, in this particular case he introduces a form of judgment that is something far more severe. Jesus does not warn about being liable to judgment or to the Sanhedrin, instead he mentions the judgment of "the Gehenna of fire."

It is unfortunate that most translations of the Bible translate this word "Gehenna" with the word "hell." "Hell" is normally understood to be the name for the place of final judgment which is called "the lake of fire" in Revelation 20:10,14,15. Outside of the reference to its being a "fiery" place, there is nothing in the text to indicate that Gehenna ought to be associated with final judgment.

"Gehenna" literally means "valley of Hinnom," which, according to Joshua 15:8, is a reference to an area on the southern border of Jerusalem. Jesus refers to Gehenna as being a "fiery" place, not because it is one and the same as the lake of fire mentioned in Revelation 20, but because it was an area in which some of the wicked kings of Israel had burned their children in sacrifice to idols (2 Kings 23:10, 2 Chronicles 28:23, 2 Chronicles 33:6). Because of this abominable practice, the prophet Jeremiah says that this same area will one day become a place for God's judgment on his own people (Jeremiah 7:31,32; 19:6).

The use of the word "hell" by most translations of this passage has caused a number of interpreters of Jesus' words to struggle to understand Jesus' true meaning. Knowing that their doctrine does not allow for any believer to be in danger of "hell," they must stretch the limits of reasonable exegesis in order to interpret Jesus' meaning.

Some expositors, believing "Gehenna" to be equated with the lake of fire of Revelation 20, claim that Jesus is simply making a more nebulous statement about sin in general and its consequences. J. P. Lange's *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Matthew*, takes such a view.¹⁴

Others say that perhaps Jesus is being hypothetical when talking to his disciples about this judgment. According to this "hypothetical" view, Jesus is discussing what *might have been* the case for the disciples, if they had not found forgiveness. Jesus discusses this hypothetical situation, so the view goes, in order for the disciples to have a greater appreciation for the redemption that they received and their subsequent escape from this kind of judgment. Since the disciples (except for Judas) were saved believers, however, it would seem that, according to this hypothetical view, these warnings have no real application for almost his entire immediate audience. This fact, I believe, ought to rule out this view as a possible interpretation.

The problem with both of these views (i.e. the "nebulous" and "hypothetical" views) is that they each lack a proper understanding of the word "Gehenna" and of the biblical doctrines of both the kingdom and the Judgment Seat of Christ.

Remember that in this passage Jesus is addressing his own disciples, and thus we can reasonably infer that he is warning of a judgment that could potentially come upon *them* as saved believers. "Gehenna," therefore, seems more logically to be a reference to the place into which Jesus elsewhere says that a wicked *servant* will be cast (Matthew 24:48-51; Luke 12:45,46). As we look into the matter further, it will become clear that, in connection with the "kingdom" theme of the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, this "casting out" or "going into Gehenna" of the wicked servant ought rightly to be understood to take place during the millennial kingdom period and *not* during eternity future. It is kingdom judgment for believers, not eternal damnation of the unsaved, that Jesus has in view in this passage. When Jesus elsewhere talks about this "casting out" of the wicked or unprofitable servant, he makes it clear that this sad event

occurs at his own second coming (see Matthew 24:50; Luke 12:46), which, of course, occurs immediately prior to the establishment of the millennial kingdom.

A further evidence of the connection between Jesus' warning about Gehenna and his other warnings about a disciple's being put out of the kingdom is found in the prophecy of Jeremiah. Jeremiah mentions a time when this valley will no longer be named for "Hinnom" but will be called "the Valley of Slaughter" (Jeremiah 7:32; 19:6). This parallels directly with Jesus' warning that his wicked servant, the one who abuses his fellow servants while the master is away, will be "cut asunder" as part of his judgment (Matthew 24:51, Luke 12:46). Jesus is giving a very sober warning of a severe judgment for those disciples of his who so viciously slander and insult their brothers.

Now, I am aware of the fact that many will be taken aback at the point I just made. Many Christian systems of theology and biblical interpretation do not allow room for any disciplinary judgment upon those who are truly saved, whether during the millennial kingdom or any other time. Despite this fact, I boldly ask you, reader, to simply ask yourself, with all systems of doctrine set aside for the moment: What is the face-value interpretation of these passages?

When Jesus says, for instance, in Luke 12:47, "The slave who knew his Lord's will, and did not get ready or act accordingly, will be beaten with many lashes," does Jesus seem to be referring to a believer or an unbeliever? Can Jesus really refer to an unbeliever as a "slave who knew his Lord's will"? If Jesus is referring to a slave, does he seem to be referring simply to negative punishment, i.e. loss of reward? Or is he quite clearly referring to positive infliction of punishment?

Or what about in Matthew 18:24-35, when Jesus says that the unforgiving servant was "delivered to the tormentors until he should pay all that he owes"? Could Jesus be saying anything other than positive kingdom judgment on believers, especially as he concludes

the parable by saying, "Likewise my heavenly Father will do to you if you do not forgive your brother from your hearts"?

Likewise, in the passage before us in Matthew 5:21-30, does a fair reading of this passage indicate that Jesus is simply making a hypothetical statement about what "might have been" the case had his hearers never believed? Or is he giving a sober and genuine warning about the very real possibility of punishment?

"He who says, 'Moreh (rebel)!' will be liable to the fiery Gehenna."

In his commentary on the passage Robert Govett has this to say to the potential objector to the kingdom punishment doctrine:

"Is it SCRIPTURE? Do not, Christian brother, seek to set aside a truth because it is unpleasant, by raising a storm of prejudice. If this be not spoken to disciples, prove it! Put it down by force of Scripture! Hew it in pieces with that two-edged sword! But if it be the word of Christ, bow to it!"¹⁵

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

Matthew 5:23,24

Jesus' disciples would no doubt have been filled with concern, as perhaps the present reader of these pages is now, upon hearing these intense warnings of Jesus. They may have been remembering the last time they were unjustly angry with their brother, or perhaps they thought of the last time they had accused and slandered their brother in the manner that Jesus just described. Were they destined for the type of judgment that their master had just said was their due? Had

they lost all hope of the reward of kingdom glory, being now sentenced to the Lord's strong hand of discipline?

Thankfully, for them and for us, Jesus goes on to explain how they and we can obtain *forgiveness* for this kind of offense against our brethren. Jesus says to "be reconciled to your brother" before you "offer your gift" at the altar. In other words, offenses between the brethren hinder an individual's fellowship with God. This is a principle on which Jesus elaborates further later in the teaching (see Matthew 6:14,15). Disciples of Jesus will one day stand before him to be judged (2 Corinthians 5:10). If today one's brother has something against him, it is important for him to make peace with his brother *today*.

"Come to terms quickly with your accuser (at law) while you are with him on the way, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Truly I say to you, you will never come out from there until you have paid up the last cent."

Matthew 5:23-26

Again, in this passage we see the very real prospect of punitive discipline that Jesus warns may come upon his genuine disciples. The fact that the disciple remains in prison until he has "paid up the last cent" conjures the same image as Jesus' explanation of his parable of the unforgiving servant: "Deliver him to the tormentors until he pays all that he owes....Likewise my heavenly Father will do to you if you do not forgive your brother from your hearts."

Remember we are in the immediate context of Jesus explaining his teaching regarding anger by comparing it to the Mosaic Law concerning murder. Jesus has explained the deadly kingdom dangers

that will result from a disciple's anger and hatred toward one of his fellow believers. In these verses Jesus uses the metaphor of an "accuser at law" to illustrate the point he just made in the previous verses about obtaining forgiveness through reconciliation with one's brother. The judge before whom the disciples will one day stand is obviously the Lord himself. In this illustration, the accuser is a disciple's offended brother. Jesus is painting a picture of believers living together with offenses against one another in their hearts. While we walk together with our brothers and sisters in this life, if any of them have a genuine offense against us, then it is as though we are riding in the car with our accuser on the way to the courthouse. Jesus admonishes us, "Seek reconciliation now!" Otherwise, like an accuser at court, once we arrive and are handed over to the Judge, the time for reconciliation is over and the time of judgment begins.

Notice, then, how important our relationships are with our fellow believers! Nothing in our lives as disciples of Christ is as important as the brothers and sisters around us. A brother's offence disrupts fellowship *with God*. Yet reconciliation with our brother not only brings about peace with men, but it is also able to restore peace and communion with the Lord himself! As disciples of Jesus, may we always remember how important the Lord considers our interactions with one another. No verbal attack, no false accusation, no internal anger harbored against a fellow believer is overlooked by the Lord. If we wish to be praised and rewarded by Jesus at his Judgment Seat, then we must be careful today to hold each of our brothers and sisters in the highest possible regard; loving them, caring for them, and quickly seeking restoration should we ever sin against them. Remember the words of the apostle Paul, "So then, *while we have opportunity*, let us work that which is good toward all, *especially toward those of the household of faith*" (Galatians 6:10).

Concerning Adultery – Matthew 5:27-30

**“You have heard that it was said to the ancients,
‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to
you that everyone who looks at (another’s) wife
with lustful intent has already committed
adultery with her in his heart.”**

Matthew 5:27,28

Here again we have a direct quote from the Ten Commandments. Jesus had just compared his own teaching to the Law’s prohibition against murder. Now he mentions the Law’s forbidding of adultery (Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18). Once again, Jesus teaches something that goes higher than the Law ever did. While the Law forbade the physical act of adultery, Jesus internalizes the matter and forbids looking at another’s wife “with lustful intent.” While the Law brought judgment for the manifestation of the sin in the physical act, Jesus addresses the sin’s point of origin: the intention of the heart.

It is important to notice that Jesus is not speaking of simply the arousal of desire that may come through a man’s unintentional, passing glance at a woman. The construction of the Greek implies that Jesus is speaking of the *intention* of the look. Jesus is not implying that an unintentional glance puts his disciples at the risk of going into Gehenna (vs. 29,30); rather he is speaking of the *intentions* of his disciples’ hearts.

When looking into the next command (Matthew 5:31,32) we will see exactly how highly Jesus regards the covenant of marriage. The Law also had a high view of marriage, which is why committing adultery against one’s spouse was such a serious offense. Jesus, however, goes further even than the Law does. While the Law forbade adultery (Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18) and carried the death penalty for the commission of adultery (Leviticus 20:10), Jesus

forbids his disciples from taking the first, seemingly minor step down the adulterous path.

Men often will have the self-control to avoid pursuing a sexual relationship with another man's wife. A desire to preserve one's own marriage, friendships, and even place in society can be sufficient motivation to avoid the overt act of adultery itself. Jesus points out that to truly be acting out of love and concern for one's own spouse, as well as for one's neighbor, he cannot even allow himself to gaze lustfully at his neighbor's wife. Imagine if your neighbor, or for that matter even your wife, could know your inner-most thoughts. Perhaps then the sin of looking lustfully would be more important to us. Jesus would remind us that there is One who can and does know the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

When the Lord spoke to Samuel about who he would have to be king of Israel, he said, "the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). Men do not have this ability when it comes to knowing the intentions of one another. An individual may get away with a great deal in this life. Much about his thoughts and intentions seem to be known only to himself. Jesus will later speak, however, of a coming day when all that is covered will be revealed (Matthew 10:26), and he follows this statement by telling his disciples not to fear those who can kill only the body, but rather to fear the one who can destroy both body and soul *in Gehenna* (see Matthew 10:29,30). He continues by saying that this is the same One who knows all, even the hairs of one's head (Matthew 10:30). Indeed, the righteousness that Jesus demands of his disciples is a total righteousness, not simply an outward one; a righteousness that penetrates to the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

"If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it from you, for it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into Gehenna. And if your right

hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it from you. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into Gehenna.”

Matthew 5:29,30

Jesus once again gives a warning in which he references “Gehenna.” Remember “Gehenna” is a reference to a severe, kingdom-age discipline for Jesus’ disciples. This time Jesus gives a warning in the form of a hypothetical situation. We know that it is *in the heart*, not in the hands or the eyes, that lustful intent and other forms of sinfulness originate. However, Jesus says that if one’s eye or hand was actually able to cause them to sin, it would be better for them to cut it off or tear it out than for them to face the judgment of Gehenna.

It is as if someone objected to Jesus’ strict teaching by saying, “But teacher, that’s really too much! I can’t control my eyes! And my hands often work before my thoughts can react!” Jesus points out the absurdity of the objection by the severity of His response.

“Well, then cut them off!” he says. Though self-amputation obviously would not really be of any value in changing the sinfulness of one’s heart, hypothetically speaking, it truly would be better to lose an eye or a hand in this age than to face the Lord’s disciplinary hand in the age to come.

As the apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:5, the Lord will come again, and when he does he “will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.” How much better it will be for a disciple to have his heart in the right place in this age than to face the Lord’s judgment in the next!

We can gain some further insight into this passage by looking at the similar one in Matthew 18:1-9. That passage starts with the disciples asking Jesus, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of the heavens?” (Matthew 18:1). Thus we can see that the subject being

discussed is position within the coming kingdom. Jesus explained to the disciples the absolute necessity of child-like humility for even simple entrance into the kingdom (Matthew 18:2-4). He then gave a stern warning against the putting of stumbling blocks in front of others (Matthew 18:5-9). The warning he gave there in Matthew 18 is similar to the one he makes here in Matthew 5:29,30. In verse nine of Matthew 18 Jesus says, "If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away..." The main difference between that passage and the one we are looking at here in Matthew five is that in Matthew 18 Jesus also mentions the alternative to being "thrown into the Gehenna of fire." He says that the approved disciple, rather than being thrown in Gehenna, will be able to "enter life."

We must look for a moment at what Jesus means when he says "to enter life" because, seeing in Matthew 18:9 that it is to be understood as the alternative to "going into Gehenna," correctly understanding this phrase will help us to better interpret the similar phrase here in Matthew 5:29. We can be certain that the phrase "enter life," when used in this context, cannot be synonymous with the free gift of new birth and the reception of eternal life as explained in John 3. The new birth is clearly explained as requiring no works on the part of the receiver. Only simple faith is required for the new birth and the subsequent reception of eternal life. In the passage in Matthew 18, however, Jesus states in no uncertain terms that *works*, specifically the avoidance of certain sins, are required to "enter life."

Jesus makes this point even more clearly in Matthew 19:17-19. In that passage, when speaking to the rich, young ruler, Jesus plainly states, "If you would enter life, keep the commandments." The vast majority of commentators have gone to great lengths to interpret Jesus' words as meaning something different than what they clearly say, that to "enter life" (in this sense) requires "keeping the commandments." The commentators discomfort with the plain reading of this passage is quite understandable. If one assumes that the phrase "enter life" means the exact same thing as the phrase "be born again," then the plain reading of Jesus' words implies a

contradiction between his words here to the rich, young ruler and his words, for example, to Nicodemus in John 3. There does not need to be this contradiction, however, if we understand the difference between the words “eternal life” as the present possession of God’s life, and when the phrase is used in reference to the reward of being present for the kingdom during the next age.

Zane Hodges, having seen these varying usages of the phrase “eternal life,” made this astute observation:

“Here it should be stated clearly that in the New Testament eternal life is presented both as a free gift *and as a reward merited by those who earn it*. But one important distinction always holds true. Wherever eternal life is viewed as a reward, it is obtained in the future. But wherever eternal life is presented as a gift, it is obtained in the present.”¹⁶

Coinciding with Hodges’ observation, Jesus and the rich young man’s conversation was about “eternal life” in a future sense, and also is clearly mentioned as being a reward according to works.

Notice also that Jesus’ explanation of how one can “enter life” exactly coincided with the teaching of the Law regarding *reward for obedience*.¹⁷ In Deuteronomy 4:1 Moses tells the children of Israel, “Listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them, *that you may live*, and go in and take possession of the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you.” The Jews, both collectively and individually, were justified in God’s sight simply because of their trust in him and his sovereign grace (Romans 4:16). Nevertheless, they, like Jesus’ disciples also, had a reward for obedience placed before them that they could either inherit or lose.

Remember, earlier we mentioned that it is best to refer to the gift of new birth and the reward of the kingdom by using those specific terms. Some other terms or phrases are used at different times to express either idea. “Eternal life” is one such phrase.¹⁸ The “eternal life” (Greek: αἰώιος ζωή - “age life”) that the man and Jesus were speaking about in Matthew 19:16-22 was to do, not with the free gift

immediately received and eternally secure, but with the conditional reward of entrance into Israel's future kingdom.

This fact is made explicit in Jesus' continued explanation to his disciples in Matthew 19:23-30. Immediately after the rich man walked away, Jesus made the statement, not using the same "enter life" terminology but clearly referring to the same concept, that it will be difficult for a rich person to "enter the kingdom of the heavens" (Matthew 19:23). Jesus then elaborates on his point at the inquiry of Peter. Jesus explains that the willingness to suffer loss in this life will procure great reward in the kingdom age. We know that he is referring to the kingdom age because he explicitly says, "In the regeneration, when the Son of Man will sit on his throne of glory" (Matthew 19:28). I cannot understand how this could be viewed as referring to anything other than the millennium.

We can therefore interpret the rich young ruler's question as being one about the very thing about which Jesus goes on to elaborate: the coming kingdom. The man was essentially saying, "Jesus, I have heard about Moses' promise of blessing in the Promised Land in return for obedience to his teaching. I have heard of the promise to David that his messianic heir will rule over the whole world from that land. I have heard Daniel and Isaiah and all the prophets speak of that coming kingdom and the glory that it will entail. Now you have proclaimed *yourself* to be that coming Messiah and have proclaimed that the kingdom is drawing nigh. I ask you, then, what specifically is required from me if I would 'live,' as Moses put it, during that coming, glorious age?"

Jesus, then, very appropriately explains what Moses himself gave as a requirement, "If you would enter life, keep the commandments." A fair reading of the passage can only lead a reader to one conclusion. The requirement to "enter life," in this particular kingdom sense, requires *works*. Jesus did not say, as he did to Nicodemus, "You must be born again." It seems to me the young ruler was *already born again*. Being justified before God, in both Old and New Testaments, was and is by simple faith in the Lord who justifies. This man

believed in the Lord. However, whether regarding the blessings to “live long in the land” in the Old Testament (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 11:9) or to “enter the kingdom” in the New Testament, there are rewards put before those who are justified that can only be realized *as a result of the believers’ works*. For the Jews to simply live within the land that Messiah will rule over, they must faithfully obey Moses. For the Christian disciple to share the Messiah’s heavenly reign during this same period, *he must obey these teachings of Jesus*. This has been and will be Jesus’ message throughout the Sermon on the Mount.

Going back to Jesus’ warning here in Matthew 5:29,30, it is clear that he is telling his disciples of two future possibilities for them when they appear before his future judgment seat. They may be rewarded with a position within the coming kingdom (Matthew 24:47; Luke 19:17,18), or they may be cast out (Matthew 24:30) and potentially into the dreaded “valley of slaughter,” which until then will be known as “Gehenna” (Jeremiah 7:32; Matthew 24:51).

Now someone might ask whether Jesus is really being so harsh as to say that a disciple of his, by simply lustfully gazing at another man’s wife, will merit his being thrown out of the kingdom into the fiery Gehenna. A careful look at his words will show that this is not exactly what Jesus is saying. Adultery itself, if left unconfessed and not repented of, indeed *will* cause a believer to fail to inherit the kingdom (1 Corinthians 6:9,10; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 5:5). Some may assume that Jesus’ saying that the one looking lustfully “has already committed adultery with her in his heart” implies that the two sins of lust and adultery are totally equivalent. Jesus does not actually say that. Jesus is saying that, while the two sins are indeed sinful to different *degrees*, they are still sins of the same *kind*. The intention of the sinner’s heart is in the same direction, away from the wife that God has given him and toward the wife of another. Thus Jesus is warning that the lesser sin will begin to lead to the worse. This is why the Gehenna warning is appropriate. It is true that the Lord knows and will judge even the thoughts and intentions of his

disciples' hearts (1 Corinthians 4:5), but here he is warning that the sin of the eye can lead someone down the path toward the sin of the body. The latter of which will disqualify a disciple from rulership in the coming kingdom (1 Corinthians 5:10).

I would like to take a moment to address an "extreme" to which this teaching can wrongly be taken. The unwarranted inference that heart-adultery is *exactly equivalent* to flesh adultery, as we have seen, is incorrect. When this faulty inference is then combined with most translations' use of the word "hell" in Matthew 5:29,30, an unnecessary level of alarm results for many young Christians, especially Christian boys.

There are helpful ways of addressing the problem of lust in the hearts of young men. However, causing an adolescent Christian boy to fear that his salvation from eternal fire is in jeopardy is not helpful to him at all.¹⁹ The warnings within Jesus' teaching should be taught with tenderness and sobriety, but there is no need to take them to extremes. Warnings like this one in Matthew 5:29,30 can actually *lose* their force when interpreters take them beyond Jesus' intent. Such extremes, especially as they relate to a person's security in Christ, can cause an unnecessary turmoil of soul. They can even cause the average believer to either ignore Jesus' genuinely serious commands, or even to dismiss them as hyperbole.

Concerning Divorce – Matthew 5:31,32

"It was also said, 'Whoever will put away his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'"

Matthew 5:31

In moving on to the matter of divorce, Jesus changes his phrasing somewhat when describing the Law's command. Concerning murder, Jesus said that the disciples "have heard that it was said to the ancients..." Concerning adultery, the matter of "the ancients" as being the original hearers is only implied and Jesus simply says, "You

have heard that it was said.” When he moves on to the matter of divorce Jesus simplifies it further, saying only, “It was also said...” After this section Jesus will go on to discuss a few more commands of the Law and will revert back to the expression “You have heard that it was said...” This slight variation may seem trivial, but it is actually quite important.

Looking at the passage carefully we will notice that in this section Jesus changes from using a direct quotation of the Law to giving his own paraphrase. Therefore Jesus alters his phraseology a bit and does not say that the disciples have “heard” that these things were said. While he does summarize a bit in some other sections as well, this section is the only one in which the referenced portion from the Law is entirely paraphrased.

We should not assume, however, that simply because Jesus is not directly quoting the Law that he is therefore not giving a fair and accurate paraphrase of the Law’s teaching on the subject. Though the Law never *directly states* that a man putting away his wife must give her a written certificate of divorce, a look at Deuteronomy 24 shows that this is indeed exactly what the Law demands. In the first five verses (Deuteronomy 24:1-5) it is explained that if a man divorces his wife and she remarries only to be divorced again by her second husband, then the original husband is forbidden from taking her back again. Both husbands are innocent of adultery, however, and it is implied that this is because, as both verses one and three say, the husband “writes a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand.” The Law undoubtedly allowed for a marriage to be broken so long as a divorce certificate was given.

“But I say to you that everyone who puts away his wife, unless it is because of fornication, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a put-away-woman commits adultery.”

Matthew 5:32

Jesus will later explain that this divorce process which the Law allowed was given by Moses as a *concession* and thus does not reflect God's original intention for marriage. In Matthew 19:8 Jesus, speaking to the Pharisees, says, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to put away your wives, but from the beginning it was not so."

The logic of this may seem strange, but in the ancient Hebrew culture it makes perfect sense. For a woman to be "put away" by her husband meant that she was without a household since the men generally were considered to own the estate. In order not to be in the position of a widow the woman would be forced to remarry. This would be an act of adultery, of course, if she were still married to her first husband. Therefore, while a righteous husband would honor his commitment to his wife, a hard-hearted one would "put her away" if he was no longer pleased with her for whatever reason. In order to protect a wife in this position, the Law commanded a husband, if he was unwilling to honor his marriage commitment, to at least make the separation official so that his wife would be free to marry another without becoming an adulteress. Hence the saying, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed..."

Jesus, however, restores God's original intention by *removing this concession*. With his disciples there is no longer an understood "hardness of heart" that necessitates a command to divorce. As with the rest of the teaching, while the Law governed people of the flesh in an external way, making necessary concessions for the sake of a functional society, Jesus demands a higher, *internal* righteousness. For disciples of Jesus the command is not, "If you cannot tolerate your wife, then at least divorce her so that she can remarry," but rather, "Love your wife and remain committed to her no matter what." In Matthew 19:9 Jesus goes on to say, "Whoever puts away his wife...and marries another commits adultery." There is no longer any allowance of putting away one's wife, not even with a "certificate of divorce" provision.

In chapter nineteen Jesus shows that the divorce provision is done away with, so a man commits adultery if he puts away his wife and marries another. Chapter nineteen speaks about the man who does the divorcing, while here in chapter five Jesus addresses the woman who is being divorced. There he says a man divorcing and remarrying commits adultery; here he explains his new teaching by saying that, by putting away his wife, a husband has *caused her to commit adultery*. This would not be the case under the Law, so long as the husband wrote a certificate of divorce.²⁰ Under Jesus' new teaching, however, a "put-away" woman would be committing adultery if she remarried, as would the second husband, because, again, there is no longer any provision for an official separation.

Now, in this passage (Matthew 5:32) as well as in chapter nineteen, there is what seems to be an exception clause to what Jesus has just taught when Jesus says, in both passages, "Unless it is because of fornication." Most commentators that I have read see this phrase as meaning that Jesus forbids putting away one's wife except in a case where the wife has committed adultery. The argument generally is that if adultery has been committed, then the marriage bond is broken already. Therefore the innocent party is absolved (so the argument says) from their duty to the marriage. This is the view that Calvin takes: "An exception is added, *except on account of fornication*: for the woman, who has basely violated the marriage-vow, is justly cast off; because it was by her fault that the tie was broken, and the husband set at liberty."²¹

In my view Calvin, along with many commentators who follow him, completely misses Jesus' point. Let's look at a few flaws in his argument.

Firstly, while this phrase "unless it is because of fornication" is found in this passage in Matthew 5 as well as in the passage in Matthew 19, it is found in neither of the parallel passages in Mark's or Luke's gospels. In Mark 10:11 Jesus is quoted as saying simply, "Whoever puts away his wife and marries another commits adultery against her." The Mark account then goes on to show that in a culture

where women were able also to put away their husbands that the same would apply to them (Mark 10:12). The Luke account also brings the same basic teaching as the one in Matthew, only leaving off the phrase “unless it is because of fornication” (Luke 16:18). If the common interpretation is correct in saying that the phrase implies that adultery is grounds for divorce, then Jesus appears to be contradicting himself in the parallel accounts. The Luke account especially leaves no room for such a provision, saying that “*everyone* who puts away his wife and marries another commits adultery.” The continuity of Jesus’ teaching from one gospel to another *demands* that an interpretation for this passage be able to remain the same with or without the provisional phrase, “unless it is because of fornication.” Otherwise either Matthew is wrong for having it there or Mark and Luke are wrong for removing it.

Secondly, if by this phrase “unless it is because of fornication” Jesus was referring to the act of adultery, then he most likely would have used the word “adultery” (Greek: μοιχεία) rather than the word “fornication” (Greek: πορνεία). Generally speaking, when discussing marriage and fidelity, any illicit sexual activity is described as being “adultery,” where “fornication” is used to mean sexual immorality committed more generally. Jesus’ use of the word “fornication” rather than the word “adultery” gives helpful insight into the correct interpretation of this teaching.

In the original Greek, the words translated “husband” and “wife” are the same as the words for “man” and “woman” (“άνήρ” and “γυνή” respectively). The context may imply that a husband or wife is being spoken about, but the simple appearance of one of those words does not necessitate “husband” or “wife” as being the correct English translation. To put it simply, the Greek language refers to a man’s wife as simply being “his woman” and a woman’s husband as being “her man.” Because of this, the same word often rendered “husband” or “wife” could be used in reference to a fiancé; a man or woman to whom one was in fact *not yet married*.

This was the case with the important example of Mary and Joseph in Matthew 1:19. Although they were just previously said to be “betrothed” rather than married (Matthew 1:18), Joseph is referred to in many translations as being Mary’s “husband.” He was not her husband yet. He was simply “her man” in the more general sense. Therefore, when Joseph found out that Mary was “with child,” he logically assumed that she was guilty, not of *adultery*, but of *fornication*. He was said, in this case, to be a “just” or “righteous” man, for mercifully deciding to “put her away quietly.” He did not need to “give her a certificate of divorce” since they were not yet married. Had they been married, it seems to me that he would certainly not have put her away. Joseph was a righteous man, not a “hard-hearted” one as the Pharisees were said to be. Had he been bound by a marriage covenant, we can be quite sure that he would have not considered breaking it.

It is not simply coincidence that Matthew’s account is the only one that mentions “putting away” as being allowed in cases involving fornication. His is also the only gospel that contains this story of Mary and Joseph. Jesus, in his teaching, removes the “certificate of divorce” concession that was given by Moses. There are no grounds given for putting away one’s wife, *not even for adultery*. He allows for “putting away” on the grounds of *fornication*, but considering that the other gospel accounts do not need to include this provision, it must be referencing, as Joseph thought was the case with Mary, sexual unfaithfulness that happens *prior* to marriage. A wise man would not go ahead with a marriage to a woman who commits fornication during their betrothal. If he is righteous, he will also be merciful enough to not want to shame her publically. He would do what Joseph did and seek to “put her away quietly.” However, once married, there are no more grounds for “putting away.” This is why Jesus concluded his original statement to the Pharisees by saying, “What God has joined together, let not man separate” (Matthew 19:6).

Lastly, I would like to point out that the common understanding of this phrase “unless it is because of fornication,” the one taken by Calvin and others, as meaning that a husband is freed from his wedding vows if his wife commits adultery is totally incongruous with the rest of Jesus’ teaching about the righteousness of his disciples.²² Are there any other examples where Jesus tells his disciples that their own righteousness is conditional upon the proper behavior of another, even of a spouse? None! Jesus is consistent in telling his disciples that, whenever they are sinned against, they are still to be absolutely unfazed in their own personal righteousness. When struck, the disciple turns the other cheek (Matthew 5:39). When sued, the disciple gives more than is asked of him (Matthew 5:40). If a brother has offended a disciple of Jesus, he is told to reconcile quickly (Matthew 5:23-25). How, then, could Jesus here teach to disregard one’s commitment to his spouse because of the other’s sin?

As Jesus will explain later, the righteousness of the disciple is to be patterned after that of God himself (Matthew 5:45,48). Through the prophet Hosea God actually used this exact example of an unfaithful spouse as an illustration for the way that Israel had treated him while they were committing idolatry. He commanded Hosea to marry a prostitute so that he could experience the abandonment that God felt as his people were unfaithful to him. Did God use Israel’s sin as an opportunity to abandon his own faithfulness? Of course not! Rather he commanded Hosea to “love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the LORD loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods” (Hosea 3:1). If Jesus’ disciples are to follow the pattern of God’s own righteousness, certainly they are not to see the unfaithfulness of another as an opportunity to abandon their own commitment to be faithful.

Concerning Vows – Matthew 5:33-37

“Again, you have heard that it was said to the ancients, ‘You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.’”

Matthew 5:33

While in the previous section Jesus only paraphrased the Law concerning divorce, here Jesus returns to using a direct quotation, and thus also returned to the phraseology, “You have heard that it was said...” Jesus quotes the Law’s position concerning vows from Leviticus 19:12 and Numbers 30:2. The making of a vow was something allowed under the Law, and the one who made the vow was obliged to keep it.

There were even some cases where the making of a vow was not only allowed, but was even commanded under the Law. In Exodus 22:10,11, a situation is described where one Israelite entrusts his animal to another and the animal dies. The text of the Law reads, “An oath by the LORD shall be between them both to see whether or not he has put his hand to his neighbor’s property.” The one entrusted with the animal is commanded to swear an oath, ensuring that the animal’s death was not his fault. If it was his fault, he must make restitution.

For another example we could turn to Numbers 5:11-31 which describes the process of deciding whether or not a woman accused of adultery is guilty. The accused woman is made to take an oath and then drink a bowl of water mixed with dust from the floor of the tabernacle. The Lord would then make the water poisonous if she was guilty or benign if she was not. This is an example of a vow that was not simply permitted, but *commanded* by God, with God himself vindicating the one who takes it truthfully.

“But I say to you, do not swear at all...”

Matthew 5:34a

It is undeniably clear that in this text Jesus forbids swearing altogether. James 5:12 makes the same command, “Do not swear, either by heaven or by earth *or by any other vow*.” This is perhaps the passage most difficult for commentators to twist into simply being a restating or a clarifying of the Law’s position.

Calvin exposes his misunderstanding of Jesus’ position in relationship with the Law of Moses when he says, “(Jesus’) purpose was, neither to relax nor to curtail the Law, but to restore the true and genuine meaning, which had been greatly corrupted by the false glosses of the scribes and Pharisees. If we attend to this, we shall not suppose that Christ condemned all oaths, but those only which transgressed the rule of the Law.”²³

Of course, one would have to be completely settled on his own doctrine and then attempt to read it back into the text in order to come up with such an interpretation. Calvin’s conclusion is not even remotely conceivable from a plain reading of the text. None of the preceding verses give *any indication whatsoever* that Jesus is referring to pharisaical misinterpretation, as Jesus directly quotes the Law, pointing out the obvious fact that the Law commanded vows be fulfilled. I would ask Calvin, “If Jesus *did* intend to ‘condemn all oaths,’ as opposed to only those in violation of the Mosaic Law, how could he have phrased it any plainer than he does here?” Jesus quotes the Law verbatim, then says, “But I say to you, do not swear at all.” I understand that it cuts against certain theological systems, but any unbiased reader of this text must conclude that Jesus is indeed forbidding all oaths for his disciples, thus making this an example of Jesus’ forbidding of something that was not only permitted but even commanded by Moses to the nation of Israel.

**“...either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,
or by the earth, for it is the footstool of his feet,**

or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.”

Matthew 5:34b-36

It is important to note that, under the Law, vows were at times indeed *commanded* by the Lord. This fact gave these vows a strong and sober validity because it was the Lord himself who would carry out the sworn outcome pronounced according to his command (Numbers 5).

Jesus explains, however, that swearing outside of the command of God is utter vanity. This is because a man who takes an oath that God has not commanded is swearing by something of which he himself has no ownership. Men, according to Jesus, must not swear by heaven, because it is “the throne of God” and man has no ownership of it. The same is true about the earth, about Jerusalem, and even about one’s own head. Jesus says, “You cannot make one hair white or black.” Therefore he forbids men to swear by any of these.

“Let your word ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ be ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.”

Matthew 5:37

Under Law there was an understood “profanity” or “commonness” about all that went on with common language. This necessitated the making of certain statements “holy” by their being sworn before the Lord. In this text Jesus effectively tells his disciples that, with them, nothing is profane; all is sacred. With them, a simple “Yes” or “No” should be sufficient for them to be believed because they treat each word that comes out of their mouth to be subject to judgment (Matthew 12:36). Any vowing beyond this simple “yes” or “no”

implies evil. Such vowing implies that a person's speech otherwise cannot be trusted.

Under the Law, all was considered profane unless it was sworn before the Lord. One could casually speak about his donkey, his tent, or his children. However, he could not take "the name of LORD...vainly" (Exodus 20:7). It was a violation of the Law's command to take something holy, like the LORD's name, and make it profane (common). Only when one really meant it could he swear before the LORD (see Numbers 30).

Jesus teaches his disciples to consider all that they say to be "sacred" in this sense, letting their "Yes" always mean "Yes" and their "No" always mean "No." It is evil and presumptuous to imply a claim to ownership of anything else by swearing by it.

I can see legitimate differences of opinion as to whether the legal oath necessary to testify in a court of law should be considered this kind of forbidden vow because of its containing the phrase, "So help me God." It is my opinion that it should be so considered.

Concerning Justice – Matthew 5:38-42

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'"

Matthew 5:38

Three separate places in the Law contain the words that Jesus quotes in the next section of his teaching. When discussing the principle of justice being carried out, Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, and Deuteronomy 19:21 all say the same thing: "Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth." The application of this principle extended to the judges in Israel, as well as to any individual who was injured. It was up to the individual to seek vengeance for a wrong done to him, and the judges were to see to it that these vengeancees were executed justly.

This principle of justice was also described earlier when Jesus spoke about the Law's position relating to murder (Matthew 5:21). In

that section he spoke about the Law's position relating to the *perpetrator* of the crime, then contrasted it with his own teaching. Jesus emphasized the greater strictness of his own future judgment of his disciples and the internal nature of the righteousness that he was demanding. Here Jesus speaks of the Law's position relating to the *victim* of the crime. The victim, under Law, was entitled to justice. Whatever loss or injury he suffered would be inflicted on the perpetrator: Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth.

Here again, no pharisaical misinterpretation is in view. With regard to justice Jesus described, in Moses' own words, what the teaching of the Law actually was.

“But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil, but whoever slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And to the one who would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever will force you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to the one who demands from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.”

Matthew 5:39-42

Again, Jesus presents a teaching that is on a far higher plane than what was given through Moses. Jesus teaches his disciples not to demand justice, but rather to offer mercy and grace. Rather than resisting an evil person or avenging themselves, Jesus commands his disciples to go above whatever is demanded or extracted from them. This commandment would apply to both interpersonal as well as legal situations.

If someone slaps another's cheek, justice would demand that he be slapped back. Jesus teaches to be merciful, in not retaliating, and gracious in offering the other cheek as well. This teaching applies

also in a legal setting. His disciples are told not to go to court to defend themselves, but to give whatever someone would take from them through the civil law. They are to go with one who demands that they go, even beyond what is demanded. They are to graciously give when someone claims to be owed, or even when another simply wants to borrow what is theirs.

For people of the world, and sadly even for many Christians, this particular teaching is judged to be entirely too extreme. In criticism of the type of face-value interpretation that we are taking here, John MacArthur says of this text, "It has been interpreted to mean that Christians are to be sanctimonious doormats."²⁴ From a natural viewpoint, we must concede that this teaching does, in fact, appear to be imprudent, irresponsible, and even dangerous.

What then? Are we to take Jesus as simply telling us to be "doormats" that evil men can happily walk all over? Is it simply "sanctimonious" arrogance to think that Jesus' words can be literally and consistently obeyed?

I believe the answer to MacArthur's objection is found elsewhere in Jesus' teaching. Although Jesus does indeed say, in this section, not to resist "the one who is evil" (Greek: "the evil one"), he will later teach his disciples to pray, "Deliver us from the evil one." It is just here that the Christian finds his true hope of carrying on while obeying this unnaturally restrictive teaching: The believer must look to God himself for protection. Jesus has not simply left his disciples as defenseless sheep among wolves. His disciples have a good shepherd who will only allow the trials to come upon them which he, by his Spirit, equips them to bear (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Concerning Dealing with Enemies – Matthew 5:43-48

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'"

Matthew 5:43

The verses discussed earlier about Jesus' teaching concerning vows (Matthew 5:33-37) were perhaps the most difficult from which to infer the common interpretation of Jesus' teaching being merely a clarification of what was written in the Law. There he clearly pointed out the Law's command to perform an oath, and then gave his direct forbidding of oaths. On the other hand, this verse in Matthew 5:43 is perhaps the one most often quoted in attempting to prove that Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, was simply teaching against the scribes of his own day and therefore was not actually changing anything that was said in the Law. Hal Haller, writing as a part of one of my favorite New Testament commentaries, says, "The command to '**hate** [one's] **enemy**' is not found in the OT. It was part of the pharisaical tradition."²⁵ This, from my study, seems to be by far the majority opinion among commentators. But is it correct? Let's look into it.

The first half of Jesus' reference to the Law is a direct quote from Leviticus 19:18. "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but **you shall love your neighbor** as yourself: I am the LORD."

Israelites were told to love their "neighbor," and one's neighbor was understood to be "a son of your own people." In other words, a "neighbor" is a fellow Israelite. Those under the Law were obliged to seek the good of all their kinsmen the way they would for their own selves. Jesus later quotes this as being the second greatest commandment in all of the Law (Matthew 22:39).

However, the second half of Jesus' reference to the Law is where the controversy lies. Despite numerous claims to the contrary, when Jesus says that the ancients were told, not only to "love your neighbor," but also to "hate your enemy," he is *not* referring to any contemporary misinterpretation of the Law, but is in fact giving a fair paraphrase of what the Law's position *actually was*. Lest there be any misunderstanding, let me say once again that the Law of Moses, given by God to the nation of Israel, *did in fact* command the nation to "hate your enemy." Where does the Law command this? Let's look.

When the Israelites' were about to go in to possess the land promised to them, Moses told them, "You shall consume all the peoples that the LORD your God will give over to you. *Your eye shall not pity them*, neither shall you serve their gods, for that would be a snare to you" (Deuteronomy 7:16). According to this text the Israelites were not only told to consume their adversaries, they were told to *not let their eyes pity them*.

Notice also the language used when Moses explains in Deuteronomy 23:1-8 which people were to be forbidden from assembling with the Israelites as they gathered before the Lord. It is true that there were some other nations who were, in fact, permitted to assemble with them.²⁶ Of the Ammonites and Moabites, however, the Israelites were told not only to exclude them from their assembly, but they were told specifically, "You shall *not seek their peace or their prosperity* all your days forever" (Deuteronomy 23:6).

So, when going in to possess the Promised Land, the Israelites were told, not only to kill their enemies, but were specifically told, "Your eye shall not pity them." And regarding certain of their surrounding nations, they were told to "not seek their peace or prosperity." I ask you, how would you describe these commands? Is Jesus not giving a fair paraphrase when he says that Moses, not the Pharisees, but *God through Moses himself*, commanded the Israelites to "hate your enemies"?

While Israel as a nation, at times had allies, *they also had enemies*. In warfare throughout history it has always been to a nation's advantage to have a certain emotional distance and rejection toward the people that will be fought against. The spreading of propaganda is a common tactic used in warfare to gain sympathy from an opponent's troops and citizenry in order to make them easier to defeat. The Law of Moses took preventative measures against this kind of tactic. Jesus is correct in summarizing the Law's position as commanding Israel to "hate" those who might oppose them in war. In other words, "You have heard that it was said... 'love your neighbor and hate your enemy'."

**“But I say to you, love your enemies and pray
for those who persecute you,”**

Matthew 5:44

Jesus, in this passage, shows us that the commands given under the Law to “hate your enemy” were, like the matter of divorce discussed earlier, not representative of God’s highest standard and desire, but were a *concession* from God’s original idea.

As Paul explains in Romans 1, from the beginning, mankind as a whole fell into every manner of ungodliness and unrighteousness (Romans 1:18). They rejected God and turned to idolatry, (Romans 1:23) and they embraced their dishonorable lusts to the point where God “gave them up” to their debased minds (Romans 1:24,26,28). Because this type of wickedness was not the exception, but was the pattern with the Gentile nations, God called his people, the nation of Israel, out from among them. Not only did he call the Israelites out, but he also gave them certain barriers to protect them against the corrupting influence of these nations. This is part of the reason that Israel had such strict ceremonial laws differentiating them from the surrounding nations, and why the Israelites were forbidden from intermarrying with those whose lands were being dispossessed. While God’s plan of redemption is to include all nations, the Law brought about certain concessions that had to be made in order to preserve his chosen people until such time that the promise to Abraham could be fulfilled and Israel’s Messiah could be revealed.

Under Law, there was a “wall of hostility” between Jew and Gentile. Paul explains that with the coming of the Christ, this wall comes down (Ephesians 2:14). God’s heart from the beginning was to bless all the nations through Israel. Therefore we can know that God’s command in the Law for the Israelites to “hate their enemies” was a temporary, concessional provision. It was different from God’s true purpose. The command was necessary because of the wickedness of mankind, but it never represented the true desire of God’s heart. The giving of God’s Son and the sending of his Spirit

enabled God to now, through Jesus, bring the command back to a perfect representation of what his desire truly is.

“So that you may be sons of your Father who is in the heavens. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Matthew 5:45-48

Jesus tells his disciples that they are to be “sons of your Father in the heavens.” They must now express the same kind of “perfect” love that God expresses. Since God causes the sun and the rain to benefit the righteous and the unrighteous, Jesus’ disciples are similarly expected to love in every circumstance.

Some may rightly object that this is an impossible thing for man, in the flesh, to do. Did not Jesus himself elsewhere say that “there is none good but God?” (Mark 10:18) How does he now command that his disciples love “perfectly,” after the same manner that God does?

Jesus will soon explain the secret (see chapter 8: **How to Gain This Righteousness**). As a glance ahead, though, look at what the apostle Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians. He says that those who are “in Christ” are able to be *filled with all the fullness of God* (Ephesians 3:19). Jesus’ disciples can emulate God’s love because they are actually indwelt by God himself, by the Spirit. Therefore, it is not unreasonable for Jesus to command his disciples to love as he does, *without regard to the worthiness of the one receiving the love*.

Anyone can love friends and family. Jesus says that there will be no reward in the kingdom for doing merely what the Gentiles and tax collectors do already. His disciples are expected to love with a heavenly love, with the perfect love of God, the kind of love that loves enemies and friends alike. This is only possible because, as Paul also says to the Roman Christians, “God’s love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Romans 5:5). This spiritual phenomenon is what enables Jesus’ disciples to obey not only this teaching, but all that Jesus commands. The disciples of Jesus are citizens of “the kingdom of the heavens.” They are a spiritual people, ones who are said to possess the very Spirit, life, and love of God.

It is quite profound that Jesus ends this section of the Sermon on the Mount with this admonition. In this section Jesus has laid out the differences between his teaching and that which was given by Moses. Nowhere is this difference more clearly laid out than in this last command. While the Mosaic Law was the greatest of all forms of human righteousness, indeed it was the only one ever given by God himself, at its best it was still a *human* righteousness.

If you will remember Jesus’ words in Matthew 22:34-40, the command to love one’s neighbor is the second highest command in the Mosaic Law, topped only by the command to love the Lord himself. I think we tend to overlook how profound it really is that Israel’s civil government actually required the citizens of Israel to *love* one another. They were told to love even to the point of esteeming one another as highly as they esteem themselves. What other civil government has ever required such things from its people?

But Jesus points out that even this second highest of commands, the command to love one’s neighbor as one’s self, is not beyond human capacity. Even Gentiles can attain to this level of righteousness. While Moses commanded the greatest of human righteousness, Jesus commanded *more than* human righteousness. In commanding his disciples to love their enemies, Jesus was commanding the righteousness of God. By clear implication, Jesus is

commanding his disciples, should they expect any reward with their Father in heaven, to love beyond what is possible for natural men.

¹ Again, for a more detailed explanation of the sermon's context, see the Addendum at the end of this work: "Notes on the Sermon's Context." For the matters discussed here, see specifically the subsection "Present/Local Context."

² (Roberts, Donaldson, & Coxe, 1885)

³ (Calvin, J., & Pringle, W., 2010) See commentary on Matthew 5:21

⁴ (Henry, 1994) See commentary on Matthew 5:17-20

⁵ (Walvoord, John F.; Zuck, Roy B., 1989, p. 30)

⁶ Jesus does do that elsewhere, see Matthew 12:1-14; 23:23,24;

⁷ See Deuteronomy 24. For further discussion of this topic see later in this chapter under the section regarding Matthew 5:31,32: "Concerning Adultery."

⁸ See Galatians 3:24. Unlike the King James rendering that the Law "was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ," my view of what is being conveyed by the Greek is better expressed in the ESV: "The law was our *guardian until Christ came*." Paul is pointing out that the Law served to preserve the nation through which God had promised the Christ would come.

⁹ The distinction between "inheritance in the kingdom" and "entrance into the kingdom" is a point heavily emphasized by some. These see "inheritance" as an aspect of reward which can be lost, while they see "entrance" as an aspect of gift which is eternally secure (Hodges, 2011, p. 110) (Dillow, 2016, pp. 90, 273, 274). While I agree that there is a distinction between "inheritance" and "entrance," and that some who "enter the kingdom" will not be among its rulers (inheritors), I see no scriptural support for the notion that all believers will necessarily be granted entrance into the millennial kingdom. I believe they ought to be assured of their entrance into the New Jerusalem in eternity future, but not the millennium. In fact, as we progress through the study of the Sermon on the Mount, we will find Jesus himself warns repeatedly, as he does in this passage in Matthew 5:20, that so far as the millennium is concerned, a genuine believer can not only be among those who are "disinherited," but can even be among those who are "cast out" (Matthew 22:12,13; 24:50,51; 25:30).

¹⁰ I would just like to clarify once again that Jesus is referring to the disciple's inheritance within the coming age of reward: the millennial kingdom. As has been shared earlier, this should not be confused with the new birth that a believer receives by grace through faith, resulting in a secured position in the New Jerusalem in eternity future. The position in the one is earned as a reward, while the other is given freely as a gift. For more information on this issue visit:

http://seekersofchrist.org/kingdom_contents.html

¹¹ If John Calvin were still alive, I would likely feel the need to offer him an apology. Multiple times throughout this work I will use Calvin's teachings as examples of what I believe to be erroneous interpretations. I do not do this because I believe that Calvin was especially erroneous, but rather because he was especially *influential*. Very often other commentators follow Calvin in his exegesis of certain passages. Many times they follow him into the truth, but in this work we will usually look into those times when they follow him into error. When citing a doctrine being taught by commentators, I generally try to cite the earliest example of that teaching that I can find. Unfortunately, many of the times where there are numerous examples of a particular view being taught that I believe to be erroneous, Calvin's explanation of that view will be the earliest that I find. So, if you can read this, sorry John. I only pick on you because your work was so influential throughout church history.

¹² (Calvin, 2008, p. 248)

¹³ Notice again that believers are the target audience. If unbelievers were the audience then he would not refer to them as "brothers," nor would it necessarily be slanderous for them to refer to another as "worthless."

¹⁴ (Lange, J.P. & Schaff, P., 2008, p. 114)

¹⁵ (Govett, Sermon on the Mount, 1984, p. 78)

¹⁶ (Hodges, 2011, p. 251) (*Italics mine*)

¹⁷ In Jesus' conversation with the lawyer in Luke 10:25-28, the lawyer asks a similar question, and Jesus responds first by asking, "What is written *in the Law*?" The lawyer responds by quoting some portions of the Law, to which Jesus responds, "You have answered correctly. Do this and you *will live*." Though it seems the lawyer and the rich, young ruler come to Jesus with very different motives (the rich, young ruler seems to have been genuinely desiring life in the kingdom age, as in Mark 10:17 he is described as running up and kneeling down before Jesus, where the lawyer is specifically said, in Luke 10:25, to have asked Jesus these things "to test him"), their questions are nearly identical, and Jesus' immediate response to both is to refer to what has been commanded in the Law. He is understanding both of their questions to be referring to "life" in the age to come, or resurrection and subsequent kingdom entrance. To both he replied with exactly what is written in the Law.

¹⁸ We will see in chapter 9: **Conclusion**, how the word "salvation" is used in more than one way as well.

¹⁹ More importantly even than preventing this unnecessary extreme, the boy should be properly instructed on how to overcome this type of temptation by walking by the Spirit of God. See chapter 8: **How to Gain This Righteousness**.

²⁰ This is further proof that, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is not interpreting the Law as a scribe, but is giving *new* and *different* teaching to his new and different people.

²¹ (Calvin, J., & Pringle, W., 2010, p. 293)

²² While Jesus teaches that a husband or wife is not permitted to abandon their marriage commitment, he does not mention the case of an unbelieving spouse abandoning the marriage. The apostle Paul makes it clear that the Lord himself taught against separation from one's spouse (1 Corinthians 7:10,11). However, because Jesus doesn't himself address it, Paul gives his own instruction that an abandoned spouse need not spend a lifetime pursuing the deserting partner. The believing husband or wife can be at peace, not under bondage, knowing that God is able, through them, to save their unbelieving, departing spouse (1 Corinthians 7:12-16).

²³ (Calvin, 2008, p. 248)

²⁴ (MacArthur, 1985, p. 329)

²⁵ (Wilkin R. N., 2010, p. 29)

²⁶ Specifically referred to are the Edomites and the Egyptians (Deuteronomy 23:7).

4 SECRECY AND REWARD

MATTHEW 6:1-18

It would be difficult for us to imagine how Jesus could possibly continue to increase the intensity and strictness of the righteousness that he has been requiring from his disciples in this sermon. After all that Jesus said in Matthew chapter five, what more could he possibly add? The kingdom righteousness that he has so far required from his disciples is one that goes all the way in to affecting the disciple's thoughts and desires. He actually concluded the previous section of the sermon by demanding nothing less than the very perfect righteousness of God. What more could Jesus possibly require?

Amazingly, as we look into this next section of the Sermon on the Mount, we will find that Jesus finds a way to continue raising the bar. Having touched on every element of righteousness, even regarding one's inner-most behavior, Jesus now moves on to discuss, no longer simply behavior itself, but the *motives* and *intentions* behind the righteous actions that his disciples perform. It is not enough for Jesus' disciples to just do the right thing, the kingdom righteousness that Jesus requires is the doing of the right thing *for the right reason*.

During the course of this next section Jesus will explain that the motivation for our righteous actions is to be the approval of God, by faith in his future judgment and reward. We know that men, even on their own, can handle performing some level of righteousness. We

can be kind, charitable, even self-sacrificial at times. However, if those who we are being kind or charitable to begin to take us for granted or reject our efforts, we quickly feel justified in rejecting them also. “Well if that’s your attitude then never mind!” We feel as if we are capable of tremendous virtue, but only so long as we receive our due praise from our fellow men.

In this section, Jesus demands more than this, indeed more even than men are naturally capable of. It takes a special grace from God for anyone to have the faith to do his good deeds with no other audience besides the Lord himself.

Introduction – Matthew 6:1

“Be careful not to perform your righteousness before men in order to be seen by them, otherwise you will have no reward with your Father in the heavens.”

Matthew 6:1

We would do well to notice Jesus’ phraseology here in the first sentence of this section. Jesus has no problem emphatically forbidding things elsewhere in the sermon. “Judge not,” Jesus says in the first verse of chapter seven. Jesus has already said in chapter five, “Do not resist the one who is evil,” and “Do not swear at all.” All of these phrases carry with them undeniable prohibitions. In this verse, on the other hand, Jesus’ use of the softer phrasing, “be careful” shows that he is not absolutely *forbidding* anything, but is rather giving a *warning* against something.

It would be impossible for a disciple of Jesus to make certain that *all* of his righteous deeds were hidden from others. Though Jesus’ commands may be said to be, in a sense, “impossible” for natural men to obey, he certainly never demands something “impossible” in the sense that it is logically absurd. In other words, Jesus demands that

his disciples love their enemies (naturally speaking, impossible), but he never commands someone to draw a square circle (logically absurd). Similarly, here Jesus is not demanding that all righteousness at all times be outside of the awareness of other people.

What Jesus is saying is that now, in his teaching, he will touch on the *motivation* behind the good works that his disciples engage in. The works of the disciple are not to be before men, *in order to be seen by them*. If they are done with that motivation, the motivation to be seen by others, then Jesus says that all reward from God is lost.

Kingdom Reward

Notice that Jesus here again brings up the notion of reward with the Father. Since the rest of this section makes it clear that this reward is yet future for the disciples, as opposed to the reward of the hypocrites which is immediate (Matthew 6:2), in conjunction with the main theme of the sermon, Jesus is no doubt talking about reward during the future millennial kingdom.

Jesus says in Luke 14:14 that the disciples' future reward will take place "at the resurrection of the just." At present the disciples are told that their reward is "with your Father in the heavens." In the future, it will be the Son who metes out this reward to his servants on the earth. Jesus says in Revelation 22:12, "Behold, I am coming quickly, *and my reward is with me*, to give to each according to his work." It will be following this second coming, with the resurrection of the faithful disciples having already taken place, that Jesus will set up his earthly kingdom and the time for the meting out of reward will begin. Understanding that Jesus is talking about reward during the coming kingdom will help us to see how this section fits together with the kingdom message of the entire Sermon on the Mount.

The Context of Matthew 5:16

The warning that the Lord gives here in Matthew 6:1 should be taken in balance with the command that we have already seen in Matthew 5:16. Jesus says both to "be careful not to perform your righteousness

before men” and to “let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in the heavens.” Do not think that these commands are contradictory. Jesus does not emphatically forbid any righteous deed that will be seen by others in Matthew 6:1, nor does he condone, in Matthew 5:16, the showiness forbidden here. Rather, these two teachings guard against the two possible errors that disciples may fall into when it comes to their public displays of righteousness. We must be neither showy nor ashamed.

For illustration, imagine two girls, both Christians who wish to honor the Lord. One of the girls is named Beatrice, and she has a natural disposition that is very out-going, while the other girl, Isabella, tends, by nature, to be more shy and reserved.

Isabella, while finding it fairly easy to heed Jesus’ warning to keep her righteous deeds a secret, may be tempted, especially around unbelievers, to keep her trust in the Lord a secret as well. If she were to do so, she would be neglecting the Lord’s command to be “light” to the world around her. She would be impeding others from the opportunity to “glorify God” (1 Peter 2:12) because of her good deeds, because they would not even know that God was the source of those deeds.

On the other hand, Beatrice, while having no problem declaring her allegiance to the Lord, may have difficulty heeding Jesus’ warning against performing good works in order to be seen by others. If she were to make a practice of performing for the benefit of others and receiving glory for herself, she would be in danger of losing the reward from her Father to be given in the next age.

The crux of the matter is simply this: Who is the one who receives the praise for the righteousness being performed? Is the praise going to God or to the individual? Jesus is teaching in this section in Matthew 6 that, whenever possible, his disciples should perform their righteous deeds in secret, so that their praise and reward will be able to come from God alone. This is not always possible, however. In the times when good works will necessarily be seen by

others, Jesus warns that the inner motivation of the disciple must still be the glory of God and not his own. “That they may see your good works, and *glorify your Father who is in the heavens*” (Matthew 5:17).

Going back to the illustration, in these two passages Jesus is firstly warning both Beatrice and Isabella not to seek the praise of men for themselves. However, he would equally admonish them that they both must still maintain an open testimony before other people, so that those around them may glorify God on account of them and their righteousness. Isabella may struggle more with the command in Matthew 5:16, while Beatrice may have trouble with the command in Matthew 6:1. Both of these commands are from the Lord, and should therefore be taken within the balanced context of each other.

Give in Secret – Matthew 6:2-4

“Therefore, whenever you do alms...”

Matthew 6:2a

How telling it is that Jesus presupposes that his disciples will be compassionate, giving people. Truly a disciple will be like his master (Matthew 10:24,25). To others Jesus often gave the command to “give to the poor” or “do alms” (Matthew 19:21; Luke 11:41). With his disciples, however, Jesus simply expects that those who are following him and being led by his Spirit will already have his same concern for the poor.

In Luke 4:18 Jesus describes his own anointing for ministry by saying, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me *to proclaim good news to the poor.*” In Galatians 2:10 Paul explains that he and his co-workers were in an obvious and assumed agreement with the apostles in Jerusalem that they were to remember the poor. God the Father’s heart is one of compassion, as was Jesus’ in his earthly ministry, so it is assumed that those who follow the leading of the Spirit will be compassionate people as well. With this

assumed compassion for the poor, Jesus does not say, “Do alms,” but rather “*When* you do alms.”

“...Sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be glorified by men. Truly I say to you, they have (received) their reward.”

Matthew 6:2b

Jesus goes on to expound upon the warning he gave in Matthew 6:1. The word “therefore” which begins this section shows that it is along the lines of the principle put forward in the preceding, introductory verse. Jesus is not necessarily forbidding doing the good work of alms-giving any time that other people might be aware of it. Rather he is showing that what matters, especially as reward with God is concerned, is the motivation behind one’s giving. The “hypocrites,” as Jesus calls them, probably referring to the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 23:13,25,27,29), give “that they may be glorified by men.”

“But when you do alms, do not let your left (hand) know what your right (hand) does, so that your alms may be in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Matthew 6:3-4

Jesus’ disciples, on the other hand, are to give in such secret that, if possible, God alone knows what they have done.

It is interesting to note that Jesus states that both the hypocrites and the disciples do in fact receive a reward for their deeds. The hypocrites reward is given immediately, while the disciples must wait until a later time. The hypocrites receive, to some level, the glory

from men that was their motivation. The disciples, however, are admonished to seek the reward that is given in the future; the reward that comes from their Father; the reward of *the kingdom*.

Instructions in Prayer – Matthew 6:5-18

Jesus continues with this matter of secrecy in righteousness by giving instructions regarding prayer. It is clear from all of scripture, both Old and New Testaments, that God honors and even desires the prayers of individuals. Virtually every major Old Testament saint is described as engaging in this practice. Abraham (Genesis 20:17), Isaac (Genesis 25:21), Jacob (Genesis 32:9-12), Moses (Exodus 33,34), Joshua (Joshua 10:12), David (Psalm 5:2; 119:164), Daniel (Daniel 6:10), and many others are all said to have had a private prayer life with the Lord. Given all of these examples, it is no wonder that Jesus assumed, as he did with alms-giving, that his disciples would already understand prayer to be expected of one desiring to live righteously. He does not start the teaching by saying, “Pray!” but by saying, “*When* you pray...”

Jesus could have used any of these saints of old as an example of being a person of prayer, but none would have been a better example for his disciples than was the Lord himself. Again and again, Jesus is recorded as separating himself from everyone else and communing with his Father (see Matthew 14:23; 26:36-44; Mark 1:35; 6:46; 14:32-39; Luke 3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18; 9:29; 11:1; 22:41-44; John 17).

Something that is often overlooked is the fact that for each of the three times that God the Father chose to speak from heaven regarding his Son, the experience was facilitated by Jesus’ prayer. Three times God spoke with a voice from heaven, once at Jesus’ baptism (Luke 3:21), once at the scene of Jesus’ transfiguration (Luke 9:29), and once when Jesus was predicting his own death (John 12:28). Each time the Father spoke, it was in response to Jesus’ prayer. Jesus understood more than anyone, not only how important prayer is in the life of a man, but even more, how important the prayers of his people are to God himself. God is moved by the prayers of men, even

moved to speak and act. Jesus lived demonstrating an awareness of these truths. When Jesus instructs his disciples, he simply assumes that, from his own example, they will live as though they are aware of them also.

How often, reader, does your life reflect this same understanding? How precious to you are your personal, private times in communication with the God of heaven? Watchman Nee once made a very sobering observation. He said, “If I would cause anyone to humble himself, I would invariably ask about that person’s prayer life. I know of nothing which will inflict sorrow and confession of failure more than asking this question. Whether it be in public or private prayer, this will be a humbling experience as well as it will stir up a desire to be delivered from such a wandering way.”¹

We must pray that all of God’s servants would awaken to the truth that so many of his saints, whether throughout church history or as recorded in the scriptures, have demonstrated for us. That is, for a life of useful service to God, continual private and personal prayer is absolutely essential.

Now, we might notice that despite the numerous Old Testament *examples* of the righteous practice of private prayer, the Law itself does not have many *commands* regarding personal prayer. The Mosaic Law, being very much a civil and legal code designed to govern a race of people as a nation, had little to say regarding the simple, pious activity of prayer. It was simply not among the subject matters that the Law needed to address. Jesus’ teaching, however, very much involved personal and internal righteousness. Thus private prayer was a very relevant matter for him.

There are two primary points that Jesus makes regarding private prayer. The first is about secrecy in righteousness, just like the rest of the teaching in this section. When making this point, Jesus uses the “hypocrites” from within his own nation as the negative example.

However, for his second point in this section, Jesus takes a moment to elaborate on prayer in a more general sense. When Jesus continues regarding the proper way to pray, he does not limit his

negative example to the “hypocrites” among the Jews. Rather, Jesus secondly mentions the practice of “the Gentiles” and likewise instructs his disciples against it.

Some within the Jewish community were guilty of praying with hypocrisy, seeking praise from others. The Gentiles, on the other hand, tended to pray with *vanity*, saying many words without meaning much at all. Contrary to both of these methods, Jesus firstly teaches his disciples to pray *in secret*, and secondly he teaches them to pray *with reality*.

Pray in Secret – Matthew 6:5,6

“Also, when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and in the street corners, that they may be seen by men.”

Matthew 6:5a

Those whom Jesus describes as “hypocrites,” again, most likely the scribes and the Pharisees, prayed with the purpose of being seen by men. Jesus explains that, when it comes to prayer, God wants the hearts of those praying to be focused solely on him. He can see through any pretension or hypocrisy. This teaching is quite straightforward.

“Truly I say to you, they have received their reward.”

Matthew 6:5b

Let us not fail to also notice the reward that Jesus mentions. The hypocrites have a reward that they receive immediately. They sowed to the earth and reaped an earthly reward. Obviously they were

indeed noticed by those men whose attention they sought and thus got some amount of earthly recognition.

“But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Matthew 6:6

On the other hand, the disciples of Jesus, when they pray with only God in mind as their audience, have a *future* reward in store.

Jesus elsewhere promises answers to the petitions that his disciples ask in his name (Matthew 21:22; John 15:16). Here, however, he mentions that the Father will not only answer prayer, but will, at a future time, give a reward simply because of the disciple’s sincerity in asking. How gracious and generous is the God we serve!

I love the way that Govett makes this point in his commentary on the passage: “Prayer daily makes us more and more indebted to God. Each answer is a ship arriving from India, putting into port laden with good things for us. We ask for peace, and we get it. We petition for supply of our need in money, it comes. We ask for relief in pain, ‘tis granted. We supplicate for the life, the salvation of some one dear to us: ‘tis given. With these gifts our obligations deepen. We are more and more in debt to God. But now the Saviour assures us, that God will requite these prayers in the coming day, as though *He* were *our debtor*, and not *we His!* Pray on then, Christian! Prayer is doubly blessed.”²

Now, along the same lines as the teaching regarding alms, Jesus’ command to pray “in secret” should not be seen as a universal ban on any form of prayer that may be heard by another. There are examples of *corporate* prayer throughout the New Testament (Acts 4:24-31; 13:1-3), and that important church practice should not be neglected simply because it cannot be done in total secrecy. However, Jesus

here is discussing the matter of personal righteousness, and to that end it is best for a disciple to, whenever possible, seek to pray secretly. I again quote Govett in his commentary, “*Public* prayer is right in its place. But true piety cannot long subsist without *private* devotion.”³

Pray with Reality – Matthew 6:7,8

While there was a common Jewish error regarding prayer that Jesus addressed, we now turn to the error committed by “the Gentiles.” While some “in the synagogues” were guilty of *hypocrisy* in prayer, some in the Gentile world tended to pray with *vanity*.

“And when you pray, do not use vain repetition as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard in their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

Matthew 6:7,8

Worship among pagans, even today, often involves chants and incantations that require little or no heart-felt meaning from the worshiper. Among the superstitious, there is often a supposed power in the mere repetition of words. Sadly this practice can creep its way into Christian worship as well. The Roman Catholic practice of “praying the rosary” is an example of this form of repetitive ritualism.

Jesus warns against this practice for reasons that are similar to his warning against praying like “the hypocrites.” To put it simply, God desires sincerity of heart. Just like the hypocrisy of the Jews, the vanity of the Gentiles is an inadequate form of prayer, especially when it comes to requests from God. The pagan-like vain repetition betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of God and his character. God knows the needs of his children before they ask! Mindlessly repeating yourself will not affect any change. While God delights in

the prayers of the saints (Revelation 8:3-4), he wants the prayers to be given *with sincerity*.

Note that Jesus is not repudiating repetition as such, but rather he forbids “*vain* repetition.” God is indeed moved by the continual prayers of the saints (Luke 18:17), but these prayers, even if repetitive, must be given with sincerity.

It’s a fairly simple concept when you consider it. Jesus’ point with both of these negative examples is that the disciples must realize that praying to God is speaking to a real, living *Person*. Prayer should not be performed as a religious or superstitious ritual. Just like any other person, God desires sincerity. Whether it takes the form of hypocritical performance or insincere repetition, all insincerity in prayer is distasteful before God.

A Model Prayer – Matthew 5:9-13

So Jesus has made the point that God desires sincerity in prayer, and he has given the negative examples of “the hypocrites” and “the Gentiles.” Thankfully Jesus does not stop there, with only negative examples, but rather in this next section he gives a model prayer as a positive example for his disciples. This prayer is commonly referred to as “The Lord’s Prayer,” but it would be more accurately referred to as the “Model Prayer Given by the Lord.” Jesus does not actually pray this prayer himself, and there are even aspects of it that would not apply to him (specifically in verse 12). Rather, Jesus gives this prayer as a model for the disciples to follow.

“You, then, pray like this...”

Matthew 6:9a

The presence of the emphatic “you” (plural), as well as his use of the word “then” (Greek: “*οὐν*”), show that Jesus is giving the model prayer in opposition to the negative example of the Gentiles, and perhaps also to the hypocrites among the Jews.

“Our Father in the heavens...”

Matthew 6:9b

The disciples are told to address God the same way that Jesus does, as “Father.” This is a privilege unique to believers, proving further that Jesus’ instruction is not for worldly men, but for *his disciples*. He is also teaching them to remember their unity with all other believers as they refer to God as “*Our Father*.” The phrase “in the heavens” reminds the disciples that the kingdom to which they belong is the heavenly kingdom, not the kingdom of this world. They will shortly be told to pray for this heavenly kingdom to come to the earth (vs. 10), but the very notion of “coming” implies that the two, that is the *kingdom* and the *earth*, are separate currently.

The prayer itself consists of, as Govett points out, “seven petitions, divided into four and three.”⁴ The first three petitions have to do with God and his glory.

Three Petitions Regarding God

The first thing to notice about this first section of the prayer is that God’s will, as opposed to man’s will, is the focus. This is tremendously profound because, as we noticed throughout chapter five, Jesus is speaking with *divine* authority. Jesus is God become man. Because of this fact, we are able, through Jesus’ teaching, to see exactly what God desires from prayer. As Watchman Nee phrased it, “The significance of this prayer lies in the fact that God has come from behind the veil and told us what He desires. This is the first time God became man and told us the prayer that strikes the mark.”⁵

Men generally assume that prayer is their own means of acquiring from God what they want. Jesus here shows that what prayer ought to be in the first place is a petitioning of God for what *he* wants.

“Let your name be sanctified,”

Matthew 6:9c

Jesus' disciples are told to line up their petitions with God's desires, and the first petition that Jesus mentions is a petitioning of God for the sanctification of his own name.

To "sanctify" means to consecrate, that is to make something "holy" or set apart. Jesus is revealing something to his disciples that is precious to the heart of God. The disciples are to ask God to work so that his own name might be esteemed by men. This desire of God to be esteemed by men can be seen throughout the scriptures.

The most memorable example of this desire of God is perhaps seen when Moses interceded on behalf of the nation of Israel. God intended to destroy them because of their rebellion and idolatry (Exodus 32:9,10), but Moses pleaded with the Lord to "relent from this disaster against your people." Moses appealed to the Lord regarding *the Lord's own reputation*, even among the pagan Egyptians. With the Lord having just demonstrated his power over all the gods of Egypt, Moses tells him not to now allow the Egyptians to accuse him of evil intent in bringing his people out into the wilderness (Exodus 32:12). It is clear that God desires his name to be esteemed by men, even by evil men.

"Let your kingdom come"

Matthew 6:10a

We should notice that this prayer is very much in line with the overall "kingdom" message of the rest of the Sermon on the Mount.

It is often overlooked that, according to Old Testament prophecy, this prayer regarding the sanctification of God's name, that which Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, will be finally and fully accomplished through the millennial kingdom of Christ. Jesus is referencing prophecies made by Ezekiel and Isaiah. A look at these prophecies will make it clear that their fulfillment will occur once God brings Israel back into their land and the future messianic kingdom is established.

Notice first what the Lord said through Ezekiel:

“*I will vindicate the holiness of my great name*, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land” (Ezekiel 36:23).

Note that God promises that his name will indeed be sanctified, even among the nations, and that this will be accomplished once he gathers Israel and brings them back into their land.

So Ezekiel spoke of the Lord’s name being sanctified among the Gentiles. Similarly, the prophet Isaiah describes the time when God’s name will be sanctified by the nation of Israel itself:

“Jacob shall no more be ashamed, no more shall his face grow pale. For when he sees his children, the work of my hands, in his midst, *they will sanctify my name*; they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob and will stand in awe of the God of Israel” (Isaiah 29:22,23).

In both of these prophecies there is a future time described when the messianic kingdom will be established. The Lord says that the establishment of this kingdom will “sanctify his name.”⁶ This shows that there is an important link between the first and second petitions of Jesus’ model prayer. The prayer for God’s name to be sanctified will have a final answer once the petition for God’s kingdom to come is also granted.

There are those who see this prayer for the coming of the kingdom as being in reference to the going forth of the gospel and the personal rule of God in the lives and hearts of believers. As has been shown earlier, N.T. Wright takes this view. This does not seem to be an allowable interpretation of the text. As Robert Govett points out, “Has not the Gospel already arrived? How are we to ask for its coming? This difficulty is so well understood, that those who so understand the kingdom are compelled to alter the terms of the prayer, and beseech the *extension of* God’s kingdom. This should be proof sufficient, that their conception of the kingdom is different from the Saviour’s.”⁷ Alva McClain agrees with Govett, contrasting the

sovereign rule of God, which McClain refers to as the “Universal Kingdom,” with the coming age during which Jesus will be personally ruling the earth, which McClain refers to as the “Mediatorial Kingdom.” He says that the latter, the “Mediatorial Kingdom,” is what Jesus was referring to when he taught his disciples to pray for the coming of the kingdom.⁸

Although there is, as we have seen, a certain present, spiritual aspect to the kingdom of God that exists among believers today, in this passage Jesus is teaching his disciples to pray for the future manifestation of God’s kingdom on the earth. From the very beginning of the sermon Jesus has been instructing his disciples on how they can inherit the coming kingdom. Here in his model prayer Jesus teaches not only that the disciples need to prepare themselves for the kingdom, but even that they must be actively beseeching the Lord to quickly usher it in.

Upon Jesus’ ascension into heaven, this prayer for the coming of the kingdom became one and the same as the prayer for the second coming of the Lord himself. In other words, after Jesus ascends to heaven, he wants his disciples to be praying for his return. “Maranatha!” was a standard greeting in the early church meaning “Oh Lord, come!” (1 Corinthians 16:22). Paul told Timothy that a special crown was laid up for all the believers who have “loved his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:8). When writing to Titus, Paul says that we are “waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). It is upon his return that Jesus will set up the kingdom for which his disciples have been taught to pray (Revelation 19:11-20:6).

I ask you, Christian, how does your prayer life compare with what Jesus instructs and with that of his early disciples? Are you among those who think to themselves, “My master is delayed in coming” (Matthew 24:48)? Are you among those to whom the word of the kingdom has been choked by “worries of the world and the deceitfulness of riches” (Matthew 13:22)? Or can you sincerely say

that you “love his appearing,” praying daily to the Father, “Let your kingdom come!”

Jesus says to each of us, “Watch, therefore, for you do not know the day nor hour” (Matthew 25:13). Let us all obey Jesus’ command, and agree with John the Revelator when he says, “He who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming quickly.’ Amen, come, Lord Jesus!” (Revelation 22:20)

“Let your will be done, as (it is) in heaven, also on earth.”

Matthew 6:10b

This third petition, obviously, regards God’s will being done. Personally, I am not sure whether this third petition is as closely linked with the first two petitions as those two are to each other.

McClain understands the phrase, “As in heaven, also on earth” to be a description of all three petitions that precede it.⁹ It seems to him that “in heaven” God’s name is sanctified, God’s kingdom is present, and God’s will is being done. Jesus teaches his disciples to pray for all three of these realities to be present “on earth as in heaven.”

Govett, however, makes an interesting case for this phrase “as it is in heaven, also on earth” to be taken exclusively in reference to the third petition, the one regarding God’s will being done.¹⁰ Whichever is the case, what remains clear is that Jesus wants his disciples to be occupied with God’s will. We are to have personal wills which are so resigned to the will of God that our prayers are firstly occupied with his interests rather than our own.

Four Petitions Regarding the Disciples

“Give us our daily bread today,”

Matthew 6:11

This line of the prayer represents the first of the four petitions which relate more to the needs of the disciples themselves than specifically to the will of God.

Requesting for God's provision of their daily bread is an essential practice for the disciples to learn if they intend to obey what Jesus teaches in the latter half of Matthew 6. Jesus will shortly be teaching his disciples to abstain from worry about the basic necessities of their life (Matthew 6:25), even to the point where he will forbid the storing up these necessary materials for their own future use (Matthew 6:19).¹¹ Before giving those commands, however, Jesus shows the secret for how these commands can possibly be obeyed: The disciples are to be in a constant state of prayer, asking each day for God's provision of their "daily bread."

Jesus would not have his disciples to seek after worldly riches, but he does teach to ask for their daily necessities. God is willing and able to fulfill them. As the apostle Paul says to Timothy, "If having food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those desiring to be rich fall into temptation" (1 Timothy 6:8,9).

"And forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors,"

Matthew 6:12

This next petition is unique. This is the only petition of the seven that is given with the understanding that its being answered is conditional. Jesus says that we are to pray that our "debts" be forgiven, but only as we are also able to say, "As we also have forgiven our debtors." This has the potential to cause confusion for some of Jesus' hearers if they are unclear about the kingdom context of this sermon, and especially of this prayer.

In one sense every believer has already been completely forgiven by God (Colossians 2:13) by virtue of his new birth. However, there is another sense, the sense spoken of in this passage, in which forgiveness is indeed conditional.

Keep in mind the distinction that we have been making between the gift of new birth and the inheritance of the kingdom. When a person is born again he receives universal and unconditional forgiveness as a gift of God, and this forgiveness is what secures the believer's position with God in eternity future. This is not the specific forgiveness that Jesus is referring to in this passage.

The matter that is being spoken of here, as is true throughout the Sermon on the Mount, is twofold. Firstly it is the matter of fellowship with God, and secondly it is the matter of how this fellowship effects the disciple's position within the coming kingdom. As we saw in Matthew 5:23-24, a disciple's fellowship with and worship of God is conditional, based upon his relationship with the other saints. Jesus said that you need to be "reconciled with your brother" before you come to the altar to offer your gift. In the next verses (5:25,26), Jesus expands this principle, relating it to the believer's position within the kingdom. Though the matter of the believer's eternal position is settled by the cross, the matter of his fellowship with God and his position within the kingdom is conditional upon the disciple's willingness to forgive others. We will have more to say on this matter shortly, as Jesus further establishes this same point immediately after finishing with the model prayer (Matthew 6:14,15).

**"And do not lead us into temptation,
Rather deliver us from the evil one."**

Matthew 6:13

These last two petitions are given in relationship to one another. Jesus' use of the word "rather" (Greek "ἀλλά") shows that he is making a contrast between being "led into temptation" and being "delivered from the evil one." Jesus is teaching his disciples to pray that the Lord would mercifully prevent from coming into their lives the types of circumstances which would lead to temptation to sin.

It takes a bit of humility for us to recognize how necessary this prayer really is. An overzealous young believer may become so confident in his relationship with God and his understanding of his spiritual life that he thinks that he can overcome sin in every circumstance. He might feel that he can look Satan straight in the face and say, “Bring it on!” Just a small amount of Christian experience should be sufficient to cure a believer of this type of thinking.

Jesus has taught a great deal regarding the way his disciples are to react to being mistreated by evil men. Each time a disciple is sinned against, there is an opportunity for righteous and spiritual obedience to Jesus’ teaching, but there is also the temptation to react in the natural, selfish way of men. While Jesus has taught them the proper way to react to these encounters with evil men, he had no intention of instilling in them a *desire* for these interactions.

Jesus makes sure that his disciples are aware of the fact that Satan is far craftier than they are, and thus they ought never to think that they have outgrown the need for God’s shepherd-like protection. As the apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:12,13, “Therefore, let *anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall*. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” This is precisely what Jesus is saying here. In every circumstance, God has given you the ability to react with the righteousness that Jesus requires. Nevertheless, we should not be so haughty as to cease praying that God would deliver us from these kinds of circumstances. “Anyone who thinks that he stands, take heed lest he fall!”

If you will notice, I have understood Jesus’ phrase “the evil one” to have a multi-faceted meaning. The Greek word is simply the adjective “πονηρός” which means “evil.” The adjective is being used “substantivally,” which means it is an adjective being used as a noun.¹² This is why some translations will say “deliver us from evil,”

while others say “deliver us from the evil one.” Either translation is allowable based on the Greek. If we understand Jesus to be saying “deliver us from the evil one,” then the question naturally arises as to who this evil one is. Most often it is assumed that the evil one is a reference to Satan, but it could also be understood to simply mean any evil individual in a given circumstance.

My view is that Jesus has an element of all of these in mind. When we compare the words here with his teaching earlier in the sermon in Matthew 5:39, we can see that “the evil one” that is the facilitator of temptation for the disciple can certainly be understood simply to be another person. However, when looking at the comparison made in 1 John 5:19 we find that “the evil one” can also be used a reference to Satan, from whom all the dark spiritual forces that control this evil world originate.

In addition to both of these, whenever a trying situation arises for a believer, he not only ought to pray to be delivered from the person who may be opposing him, as well as from the spiritual forces working behind the scenes, but he also should pray to be delivered from evil itself. Satan is clearly interested in leading God’s people astray, and common experience tells us that other people are often his tools for doing just that. However, James 1:14 tells us that a Christian can also be enticed to evil simply by “his own lust.” Thus, in my view, all three possible understandings of Jesus’ words are legitimate. We ought to pray to be delivered from “the one who is evil” meaning men who might oppose us, from “the evil one” meaning the devil himself, and also from “evil” meaning from our own tendency toward the sinful behavior itself.¹³

Explanatory Word About Forgiveness

“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

Matthew 6:14,15

With this short explanation Jesus makes it clear why he used the phraseology that he did a few verses earlier.

It goes without saying that Jesus’ disciples will certainly have times when they must seek forgiveness from God through prayer. The use of the word “debts” in verse twelve seems to be synonymous with the word “trespasses” here in verses fourteen and fifteen. Jesus often used debt and indebtedness to illustrate a sinner’s position in relation to God (Matthew 18:21-25; Luke 7:41-48).

It will not be long after a person first believes in Jesus for salvation that he realizes that he still continues to accrue this kind of “debt” toward God and thus still needs God’s forgiveness. This forgiveness is somewhat different than the forgiveness one gets when he first believes. When one first believes in Jesus he receives the kind of forgiveness that turns an enemy into a friend. He goes from being under God’s wrath to being in God’s family. For every true believer, this forgiveness has already been eternally secured. The kind of forgiveness spoken about in this context is different. Here the forgiveness is not about moving from being under God’s wrath to being in his family, but about how one operates while *already in* the family of God. This is the forgiveness that brings a servant from the position of being unprofitable to being profitable; that turns a child from being deserving of discipline to being worthy of reward. This is the kind of forgiveness that believers are to regularly seek from God, reconnecting their relationship so that they can move forward in service to him.

While the initial forgiveness has more to do with eternity, the forgiveness spoken of here has everything to do with the kingdom. As far as eternity goes, whoever believes “is not judged” (John 3:18). Regarding one’s position in the coming kingdom, however, each will “stand before the Judgment Seat of God” (Romans 14:10). This is why confession and forgiveness is still necessary, even for a believer.

This passage brings to light one important fact regarding this relational forgiveness that Jesus would have his disciples aware of. This forgiveness, unlike the eternal forgiveness given upon initial faith, is here said to be *conditional*. God’s forgiveness in this sense is directly related to the disciple’s forgiveness of others.

This doctrine is most clearly laid out in the parable that Jesus tells in Matthew 18:23-35. From the outset Jesus makes it clear that this parable does not regard eternal salvation but rather is about “the kingdom” (Matthew 18:23). In the parable there is a king who forgives an unpayable debt owed to him by one of his servants (Matthew 18:26,27). No doubt this pictures the forgiveness that God grants to us. We have no means of repaying what we owe, but in his mercy God forgives us anyway.

However, in the parable, the servant whose debt was forgiven does not show the same type of mercy to another. When the servant later finds a fellow servant, a man who is in debt to him, rather than imitating the merciful character of his master, he behaves harshly and demands the payment from his fellow servant (Matthew 18:28-30). Perhaps the original servant’s only reaction to his encounter with his master was to breathe a sigh of relief, thinking only of his own desperate financial situation. It seems he had not taken any time to reflect on the tender mercy of his master. This pictures a believer who, despite the amount of forgiveness he has received from God, thinks only of his own situation and refuses to offer this same kind of forgiveness to others. The apostle Paul twice in his letters teaches against this attitude, saying that believers should forgive others after the same manner of God’s forgiveness of them (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13).

Once the master in the parable heard about the servant's refusal to forgive his fellow servant, he reneged on his own offered forgiveness! He took his unforgiving servant and "delivered him to the tormenters" (Matthew 18:34) until his debt would be paid off. Notice how the forgiveness of the master was *conditional* upon the one servant's forgiveness of the other.

The parable ends with a very stern and sober warning. With regard to the future kingdom, God will deal with his servants in the same manner that this king dealt with his. Temporal, yet severe *punishment* can potentially fall upon a genuine servant of God during the course of the millennial age (Matthew 18:35).

While this may be a shocking and controversial doctrine for some Christians (as it often flies in the face of some systems of theology¹⁴), this truth should not be a surprise to us, considering all that Jesus has already said concerning the disciplinary judgment that is possible for the disciples (e.g. Matthew 5:21-26). If a believer desires the forgiveness from God that allows him to escape this kingdom discipline, this parable, as well as Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, says that he must be ready to forgive and be forgiven by his brothers (Matthew 5:25,26).

Fast in Secret – Matthew 6:16-18

"And when you fast,..."

Matthew 6:16a

Fasting and Prayer

Jesus' instructions concerning fasting should be considered as the final installment of the section of his teaching concerning prayer.¹⁵ Fasting, throughout the scriptures, is a constant companion of prayer.

Look for instance at Ezra 8:21-23. Because Ezra had told king Artaxerxes that God would protect the people on their journey back to Jerusalem, he felt a heightened burden to pray. Realizing that the Lord's reputation was on the line, Ezra decided to proclaim a fast to

accompany the prayers being offered by the children of Israel for their own safety.

Likewise, in the book of Acts, when the brothers were gathered together in Antioch, they added fasting to their other service to the Lord (Acts 13:2), and it was in this context that they were able to hear the Holy Spirit say, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Also, before obeying the Holy Spirit by sending the apostles off, the brothers both prayed and fasted, apparently for Barnabas and Saul and their missionary journey. Fasting was a helpful addition to the prayers of the saints.

Additionally, fasting is often said to accompany godly sorrow and was at times accompanied by sackcloth and ashes during times of great concern or mourning. This type of fasting occurred because of the deaths or potential deaths of loved ones (2 Samuel 1:12; 12:16; Esther 4:3), or over an awareness of grave sin (1 Samuel 7:6; 1 Kings 21:25-29; Daniel 9:3-5; Jonah 3:5). No matter the occasion for fasting throughout the scriptures, it seems universally to be a means of expressing and displaying to God something that weighs heavily upon one’s heart.

Note on Asceticism

Lest anyone get the wrong impression about fasting, I must make a point here about the idea of asceticism. The Concise Oxford English dictionary defines the word “ascetic” as “characterized by the practice of severe self-discipline.”¹⁶ The apostle Paul goes even further in referring to asceticism as being in line with “severity to the body” (Colossians 2:23). It must be pointed out that this practice is renounced in the scriptures in no uncertain terms. We must guard against the notion that is common within pagan religion that injuring one’s body is a means of acquiring favor with God. This is not at all what Jesus has in mind when he talks about fasting.

As we have seen, fasting is a helpful accompaniment to prayer. We must understand that denying food to yourself for a time is only for the benefit of your own focus in prayer. We should never behave

as the prophets of Baal, injuring ourselves in futile attempts to get God's attention or to procure his favor (1 Kings 18:28,29).

There is a tangible way to distinguish Biblical fasting, the kind that Jesus is speaking about, from the asceticism of the pagans. Fasting, in the biblical sense, is for the sake of the *one praying*. It is not to be seen as a means of altering the *one being prayed to*. Prayer moves God's heart, and fasting can put a disciple in the proper prayerful attitude, but it should never be seen as a way of "twisting God's arm" in an attempt to obligate him to the disciple's wishes on account of the disciple's suffering.

Notice in Mark 9, when the disciples had tried and failed to cast an evil spirit out of a young boy, Jesus comments on the unbelief of his generation. Jesus even addresses the lack of faith in the boy's father. After Jesus cast the spirit out of the boy, his disciples asked him why they themselves were not able to. Jesus responded by saying that "this kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting."¹⁷ By this Jesus must be meaning that the faith of the disciples needed to be strengthened through prayer and fasting. It was not something that was objectively necessary as there is no mention of Jesus himself praying or fasting in order to cast the demon out. Continued prayer and its accompanying fasting must be understood to be primarily for the heart and faith of the one praying.

Secrecy and Inner Motivation

**"...do not become gloomy like the hypocrites,
for they neglect their faces that their fasting
may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they
have received their reward."**

Matthew 6:16b

With the various examples of fasting in the Old Testament, it is easy to see how the temptation could arise to consider how others perceive

you during a fast. There were some whom Jesus calls hypocrites (again, most likely the scribes and Pharisees) who had made a habit of carrying out this practice of fasting with the intent of being seen by others and being considered righteous. Jesus tells his disciples that fasting with that motivation, while it can gain the praise of men that it seeks, will procure no reward from God in heaven.

“But when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face, that the fasting may not be seen by men, rather by your Father who is in secret. And your Father, who sees in secret will reward you.”

Matthew 6:17,18

The disciples are told that when the urgency in their heart regarding their prayer reaches the level that they desire to increase their focus through fasting, they ought only consider God’s opinion, both of their prayer and of their own internal urgency in that prayer. As we have already seen in this section, God wants full sincerity of heart from those who pray to him. If Jesus’ disciples wish for the future reward that comes from God, they must today let go of all internal motivation for the praises of men.

The lesson that Jesus has put forward in this section is arguably even more strict than what he taught in the previous section. While the inner righteousness of Matthew 5:17-48 requires the disciple to trust in the *present* experience of God the Holy Spirit for help in carrying out Jesus’ demands, the secret righteousness found here in Matthew 6:1-18 requires the disciple to trust in the *future* reward from God the Father. Notice the heavy emphasis that Jesus places, throughout his teaching, on the need for *faith*. Faith in God is foundational to all obedience to Jesus. If we do not sincerely believe that God is with us to help today, and will be the one to reward us in the future, then we are hopeless in obeying Jesus’ words. This is

especially true regarding his words in this section about secrecy in righteousness.

¹ (Nee, Heart-to-Heart Talks, 2012, p. 111)

² (Govett, 1984, p. 155) (*Italics his*)

³ (Govett, 1984, p. 151) (*Italics his*)

⁴ (Govett, 1984, p. 168)

⁵ (Nee, Interpreting Matthew, 1989, p. 103)

⁶ The LXX, in both of these prophecies, uses the exact same Greek words for “sanctify my name” that Jesus uses in Matthew 6:9. It is very unfortunate that the KJV and other subsequent translations use the word “hallowed” rather than “sanctified” in the passage in Matthew, thus causing many to miss the clear parallel that exists between Jesus’ words and the words of the prophets. Likewise, the common “hallowed be thy name” translation does not capture very well the imperative aspect of the phrase. At least to me, the common translation seems to imply a quiet reverence for God in heaven. Considering the imperative mood that Jesus uses, as well as the Old Testament prophecies that he is referencing, it should be clear that Jesus is not here demonstrating the quiet reverence for God that the common translation evokes, but rather the active call for God to move, specifically, as this next verse makes clear, for him to move to bring in his kingdom.

⁷ (Govett, 1984, p. 169) (*Italics his*)

⁸ (McClain, 1959, pp. 34, 35)

⁹ (McClain, 1959, p. 34)

¹⁰ (Govett, 1984, p. 170) Govett’s view is that, though God’s will is done in heaven, this does not mean that “the kingdom” has arrived there, any more than it has arrived on the earth. To prove his point he references Revelation 12:10-12. In Revelation 12:10 a voice in heaven says, “Now the salvation and the power *and the kingdom* of our God...have come.” Two verses later the voice continues, “Therefore, rejoice, O heavens!...But woe to you, O earth and sea!” These statements prove to Govett that it is only at this point in Revelation 12 (which he takes to be prophetically describing a future event) that the kingdom newly arrives in heaven. The text cannot be speaking simply of heaven’s rejoicing over the kingdom’s move to the earth, because the earth, at this point, has the woe being pronounced upon it. Therefore, to Govett, the kingdom does not actually exist in either the heavens or the earth. Once Satan is cast to the earth (the event described in Revelation 12), the kingdom will have arrived in heaven, and then once Satan is bound under the earth, the kingdom will have arrived on earth as well (the earthly aspect of the kingdom being the millennium).

My hesitancy with entirely swallowing this argument stems from the fact that there are multiple “heavens” mentioned in the scriptures. It could easily be that Jesus is referring to the third heaven and the throne of God (2 Corinthians 12:2; Revelation 12:5) when in Matthew 6:10 he says, “As (it is) in heaven, also on earth.” Then, in Revelation 12:12, the voice could be referring to the second heaven, the present place of spiritual warfare (Ephesians 6:12) as well as the first heaven, the physical sky over the earth (Genesis 1:20), when it says that the kingdom is newly arriving.

¹¹ See chapter 5: **Transitional Note** and chapter 6: **Do not Be Anxious**.

¹² A popular example of the substantival adjective is found in the title of the Clint Eastwood movie *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. I think you’ll agree that it would have had less poetic force if the adjectives had been used normally, with the movie being titled *The Good Guy, the Bad Guy, and the Ugly Guy*.

¹³ I am no expert in textual criticism, so take my opinion only for what it is worth. The view that makes the most sense to me is that the second half of verse 13 that reads “For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.” was not in the original text. While I am admittedly reliant upon others for their evaluation of manuscript evidence, I would like to make one observation that I believe gives internal evidence against the inclusion of this phrase. The explanatory note that immediately follows Jesus’ model prayer is regarding forgiveness of sins, both of the disciple before God and of the disciples among each other. The note starts off with the word “therefore” and thus implies to me that it ought to be linked with what comes immediately before it. This would make sense if what came immediately before was a modeling of how to pray for forgiveness and for help in avoiding sin. To me, it does not make sense that it should follow the poetic doxology that some manuscripts have at the end of the prayer.

¹⁴ For instance, David Brown completely rejects Jesus’ own plain explanation of the parable by saying, “We must not understand [Jesus] to teach that such literal reversals of pardon do actually take place in God’s treatment of His pardoned children—for that, we take it, is but the dress of the parable.” (Jamieson, Rev. Robert; Fausset, Rev. A. R.; Brown, Rev. David, 1945) How can anyone take that to be the meaning when Jesus plainly states, “So also my heavenly Father will do to you (the disciples) if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”?

¹⁵ My understanding of the conjunctions used in the first few verses of Matthew 6 (οὖν, δέ, and καί), leads me to the conclusion that Jesus discussion regarding fasting is actually a further development in Jesus’ instruction with regard to prayer. Had Matthew 6:16 started off with the word “καί,” as Matthew

6:5 does, then it would seem that a new subject is being introduced. But since the passage instead begins with the word “δέ,” I take Jesus’ words about fasting to be simply a development of his teaching regarding prayer. This understanding of the conjunctions (or “connectives” as he calls them) is based off of Steven E. Runge’s *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, specifically in chapter 2. (Runge, 2010, p. 57)

¹⁶ (Soanes, Catherine; Stevenson, Angus, 2004)

¹⁷ There is a textual variance here as some manuscripts omit the words “and fasting.” The principle of the issue being the quality of the disciple’s faith, not some required ascetic practice that God was waiting for, holds true with or without the addition of fasting.

5 TRANSITIONAL NOTE:

EARTHLY DENIAL FOR HEAVENLY REWARD

MATTHEW 6:19-24

The concept of future recompense, whether positive or negative, and how it relates to the coming millennial kingdom, has been the theme of the Sermon on the Mount as we have studied it so far. For review, remember Jesus' words about reward in the beatitudes (Matthew 5:12), his warnings about entering or not entering the future kingdom (Matthew 5:20), and especially his mentioning of "reward" eight times from Matthew 5:46 through Matthew 6:18. Remember also how Jesus has routinely mentioned the idea of future disciplinary judgment for his disciples. He warned of the possibility of missing the kingdom (Matthew 5:20), and also gave multiple warnings of certain specific possible judgments. Recall his reference to the judgment of prison in Matthew 5:25,26, as well as to the judgment of "Gehenna" in Matthew 5:22,29,30.

Jesus has told us that when he returns to the earth and reigns in his kingdom it will be the faithful and righteous among his followers who will be rewarded with the crowns of co-rulership with him. Those who are unfaithful, on the other hand, though still secure in their final salvation from damnation, will lose out on this kingdom reward, and could also potentially face some measure of disciplinary judgment.

Now as Jesus' teaching continues, his point of emphasis will shift somewhat. He is still talking about the disciple's life as it relates to the kingdom, but he looks at it from another angle.

Up to this point Jesus has placed a strong emphasis on the disciple's future, heavenly reward. Starting with the next section the focus of the sermon will shift to the disciple's present, earthly attitude. In the section following this one (Matthew 6:25-34) Jesus will be telling his disciples to be completely free from the worries and cares of life in the present age. In the section we are looking at presently (Matthew 6:19-24), we have what is essentially a transition from the previous section into the next. In this transitional section Jesus continues to elaborate on the kingdom idea of future reward, but his emphasis has changed. He does not speak so much anymore about the specific righteous behavior that will secure the reward. Rather Jesus begins talking about the disciple's ability to overcome the present-world desires and worries that would turn the disciples' focus away from God and away from his heavenly reward.

The Principle – Matthew 6:19-21

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on the earth, where moth and eating destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor eating destroys, and where thieves do not break in and steal.”

Matthew 6:19-20

Translational Note: “Eating” vs “Rust”

Right away I am sure you have noticed a discrepancy between my rendering of these verses and what is normally found in the various English Bible translations. Most translations translate the Greek word

“βρῶσις” found in this passage with the English word “rust” (i.e. “where moth and *rust* destroy...”). There is some logic to the common translation, but the word literally means “eating,” and is translated with that concept elsewhere in the New Testament. The word “βρῶσις” is sometimes translated with the word “food” (John 4:32; 6:27,55; 2 Corinthians 9:10; Colossians 2:16), or with the word “meal” (Hebrews 12:16), or sometimes with its literal translation “eating” (Romans 14:17 1 Corinthians 8:4). Nowhere else but in these verses in Matthew 6:19,20 is this word “βρῶσις” translated “rust.” I trust you will see shortly why I take it to be rightly translated in this passage in Matthew 6:19,20 with the same literal sense of “eating” as it is always otherwise found in the New Testament.

It seems that the thought behind translating “βρῶσις” as “rust” is that rust is an “eating-away” at metal possessions, perhaps specifically precious metals.

It is understandable that someone would take this to be Jesus’ meaning because there is a somewhat parallel passage in James 5:2,3 which does mention the “rusting” of gold and silver. James often gives similar, almost paraphrased instruction compared to what Jesus teaches in the gospels.¹ In the verses parallel with this one James says, “Your riches have rotted and your *garments are moth-eaten*. Your *gold and silver have rusted...*” (James 5:2,3) The moth and rust are closely associated, leading some to conclude that he is either interpreting, or at least referencing Jesus’ words in this passage in Matthew 6. Barbieri seems to take this view,² and Matthew Henry sees it as one allowable interpretation.³

There are a few crucial differences, though, between the James passage and Jesus’ teaching that will demonstrate why the literal translation of “eating” is to be preferred.

Firstly, and quite simply, the words used are different in the two passages. James uses two words that could mean “rust” or “corrosion,” or, depending on the context, “poison” or “venom.”⁴

Neither of the words used by James is the word “βρῶσις.” βρῶσις, throughout the scriptures, always has to do with food or eating.

Secondly, James and Jesus have quite different audiences in mind for their warnings. James is speaking to “the rich” (James 5:1), where Jesus is speaking to his own disciples, whom he warns over and over again about the deceitfulness of riches (Luke 6:24; 16:15). It would make sense that James would feel the need to warn against the “rust” or “corrosion” to which precious metals are subject, while Jesus would not need to include this warning, foreseeing that his disciples would later be able to say, “Silver and gold I have none” (Acts 3:6).

Thirdly, it should be pointed out that the while Jesus leaves off the silver and gold notion mentioned in James, the James passage does not leave off the idea that we are taking to be conveyed in Jesus’ words. James not only mentions treasure being destroyed by “rust” and “moths,” but he also says that “your riches have rotted.” This “rotting” almost certainly points to food. Jesus warns that, for his disciples, food will be consumed by “eating,” while James warns that, for the rich who may tend to hoard up their wealth, their food will be subject to “rotting.” So in the passage in James three items are mentioned: food, clothing, and precious metals. In the passage here in the Sermon on the Mount only two are mentioned: food and clothing. Both Jesus and James see food and clothing as earthly treasures that will not last. James, speaking to the rich, additionally includes a warning about precious metals. Jesus, speaking to the poor disciples, does not.

Finally, the interpretation that we are taking here is the only one that fits logically with the next section about ceasing from worry. Jesus is warning that “food” and “clothing” are treasures that are subject to consumption. Here he warns against the storing up of these earthly commodities, and later he will admonish his disciples not to worry about their supply of those exact two items: food and clothing (Matthew 6:25).

If Jesus were only warning about the corruption which comes from moths and rust, then it would seem he is only forbidding the hoarding

up of precious treasures like silver and gold, and perhaps by implication fine and expensive clothing. This would be a far easier command to follow than the one that Jesus actually gives. Christians today have a hard enough time with the easier command! But Jesus goes well beyond the mere avoidance of extravagance. Jesus forbids the storing up of not only gaudy riches, but even of the most basic necessities. It would require some amount of humility in order to abstain from storing up excessive material wealth, but it additionally requires great faith to abstain from storing up even the basic necessities of food and clothing. Let us not rob Jesus' words of their intended severity by taking the easier, but less literal understanding.

Advantages of Heavenly Treasure

Watchman Nee points out that the principle at work in this verse is the same as that found in Proverbs 19:17.⁵ "Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed."

Four times in this chapter alone Jesus has mentioned a reward that is "with your Father" who is in heaven. One thing a disciple can do to secure this reward is to give to the poor, so long as he does so only with God's thought in mind (Matthew 6:3,4). In doing so, Proverbs 19:17 says that he "lends to the Lord," knowing that he not only will have a high return on his investment, but that his investment will be entirely secure. If there is anyone faithful enough for us to confidently lend to, it is the Lord. Jesus tells his disciples that the treasure that is with God in heaven is far more secure than any treasure that may be accrued here on earth.

Not Simply Warned Against, But Forbidden

Now, while it is true that Jesus explains the superiority of heavenly treasure over earthly treasure, let us not think that this is all that he is doing. Jesus is not giving a warning, but a *command*. He does not say, "Here are your two options, heavenly treasure and earthly treasure. I'd pick heavenly if I were you." Unlike the warning that he gives in Matthew 6:1, Jesus does not simply say, "Beware of

laying up treasure on earth,” rather he gives the direct command, “*Do not* lay up for yourselves treasures on earth.” Just because Jesus graciously explains why obedience to his command will be personally advantageous to the disciple, let us not overlook the fact that this is indeed a direct command.

Sadly many Christians, upon hearing this severe teaching, simply take it as a helpful warning. Without evaluating their own conscience in light of Jesus’ word they will take all manner of worldly precaution in order to secure their wealth for their own future and for that of their children. The sentiment is often, “I’m fine in building as much wealth for myself as necessary so long as I don’t forget that heavenly treasure is better.” But this is not what Jesus commanded.

Exactly how to apply this teaching to things like savings accounts, investment properties, life-insurance, etc. I will leave to the individual conscience of each believer. We know that there are righteous uses of wealth that are permissible for believers and even required of them. Providing for one’s family is obviously one such required use of wealth (1 Timothy 5:8). Material wealth can even be utilized for the securing of the heavenly treasure that Jesus has spoken about, as his parable in Luke 16:1-13 demonstrates. However, this passage in Matthew 6:19,20 clearly shows that there is a distinction between using wealth for godly purposes and storing up treasure for oneself on earth. We must be careful to guard against what Jesus has expressly forbidden.

Difference from the Command of the Law

As is also the case with many previous sections, many commentators attempt to soften Jesus words, often trying to make them more congruous with what was spoken in the Law. In an attempt to turn Jesus’ words into simply a command against covetousness, as opposed to a genuine ban on the laying up of earthly treasure, John MacArthur points out that God often “made promises of material blessing to those who belong to and are faithful to Him.”

Now this is indeed a true statement. The Old Testament characters that MacArthur mentions, Abraham and Job, both of whom were very wealthy, help to prove this point.⁶ MacArthur could have further pointed to the promises in the Law of Moses of material blessings for Israel's covenant faithfulness. God told the nation of Israel, "You shall eat *old store long kept*, and you shall clear out the old to make way for the new," (Leviticus 26:10) and "The Lord will command blessing on you *in your barns* and in all that you undertake" (Deuteronomy 28:8). Thus we see that both under the Law, as well as before the Law, earthly treasure laid up for the future, far from being forbidden by God, was often a mark of God's blessing for righteous obedience to him.

The problem with this understanding of Jesus' command, though, is that Jesus' disciples are a *heavenly* people, not an earthly one. It was quite all right for Abraham or Job or the Israelites under Moses to store up earthly treasure, as the earth is the area of God's promise to them (See Genesis 15:18-20; Deuteronomy 15:4-6).

"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Matthew 6:21

With Jesus disciples, however, the promised blessings are said to currently be "with your Father in the heavens." Old Testament saints had many earthly promises of blessing. They were promised land, wealth, victory in war, and abundance of progeny (see Deuteronomy 28:1-14). Jesus' disciples, on the other hand, are told that they are blessed if they are poor (Luke 6:20), and are certain to be persecuted and hated for his sake (Matthew 10:16-25). This passage, as well as many others, makes it clear that Jesus did not want concern for worldly things to prevent his disciples from being an *exclusively* heaven-minded people.

It is often taught that if a person gets his heart in the right place, then proper action will follow. Jesus tells us here that, in the case of

riches, the inverse is also true. The action of storing up treasure actually leads the heart in one way or another. Either treasure stored on earth will bring one's heart to the world, or treasure stored in heaven will lift one's heart up to God. *The heart follows the treasure.*

Now for those under the Law it was good to lay up treasures on earth. The earth was the area of their promised blessing, and so it was quite appropriate for their heart to be focused there as well. For us, however, Jesus says that our treasure must *not* be on the earth, neither is that where our heart is to be occupied. If Jesus' disciples will make the conscious choice to abstain from the laying up of treasure on earth, they will begin to notice that their heart will cease to be consumed with earthly things, things that would distract them from the heavenly work to which God calls them. As we instead begin to consider how much reward is being stored up with God in heaven, and as we work to build up that heavenly storehouse, we will progressively become the heavenly-minded people that Jesus calls us to be.

Singleness of the Eye – Matthew 6:22,23

“The lamp of the body is the eye. If, then, your eye is single, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is evil, your whole body will be full of darkness. If, then, the light in you is darkness, how great the darkness!”

Matthew 6:22,23

The metaphor that Jesus uses in these verses is quite profound. In a very literal way, light does actually enter the body through the eye. Without getting into the ophthalmological details about it, suffice it to say that Jesus conveyed an accurate phenomenon. If a person loses his eyesight, it can accurately be said that he is “in darkness.”

Jesus occasionally uses the notion of eyesight to refer metaphorically to one's heart-desire (Compare Matthew 5:29 with Matthew 20:1-16; see also Mark 7:22). He deals specifically about greed for money in the parable of Matthew 20. In this parable, Jesus speaks of workers who expected to get paid more than they were promised by their master. The workers were asked by the master, "Is your *eye evil* because I am generous?" Looking again at the context within the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:29), the "singleness" of the disciples' eye must refer to his *exclusive* love for, and service to, God. One who has an "evil" eye, just like one of the workers in the parable of Matthew 20, must then be one whose service to God gets corrupted by his love and service for the world's wealth.

Jesus contrasts these two as opposites. He says that the one with a "single" eye is full of light, while the one with an "evil" eye is full of darkness. To help us fully grasp Jesus' meaning I think we would do well to look at something similar that the apostle John says in his first epistle. John mentions "walking in the light" as referring to being in proper fellowship with God, and calls "darkness" the status of being out of fellowship with God (1 John 1:5-7). John says this shortly before saying, "Do not love the world, nor the things of the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him."

Now John's words harmonize exactly with Jesus' teaching about singleness of vision versus divided vision. If one has a heart desire for the world's goods (in this context namely material wealth), then he is "in darkness" when it comes to his relationship with God. Jesus had just explained why it was important to have heavenly treasure rather than earthly, again, because one's heart naturally follows his treasure. In this passage Jesus continues his point by saying that once a disciple's heart is inclined toward God in heaven and away from the things of the earth, it is important to make sure that things stay that way. In order for a disciple of Jesus to have proper fellowship with God, his heart's desire must be singly focused on God himself, not wavering back and forth, trying to divide its devotion between heaven and earth.

Two Masters – Matthew 6:24

“No one can serve two masters, for either the one he will hate and the other he will love, or to the one he will be devoted and the other he will despise. You cannot serve God and Mammon.”

Matthew 6:24

Here Jesus summarizes this entire transition section. He mentions two potential masters that he calls “the one” and “the other.” Because of the order in which they are given, we can assume that “the one” refers to God and “the other” refers to “Mammon” (Aramaic meaning “wealth”⁷). Jesus’ point is that the disciple must make a choice. So many today would like to have it both ways, being devoted to God, yet loving the accumulation of wealth. Jesus says, in no uncertain terms, that this is simply impossible. As unpopular of a teaching as this may be, there is no getting around the fact that, according to Jesus, the lot of his disciple in this age is one of poverty of spirit (Matthew 5:3). If one’s heart begins to long for material wealth, he will naturally begin to hate his God who calls him to lay it aside. Contrarily, if one’s heart is entirely devoted to God, he will be ready and willing to despise and reject the accumulation of the world’s goods.

While this teaching sounds harsh, it is the necessary foundation for what Jesus will teach next. Jesus is about to forbid all worrying about the things of this world (Matthew 6:25-34.) The only kind of disciple who can even entertain the thought of obeying that teaching is one who has set his heart to serve God exclusively, rejecting entirely the desire for the world’s goods.

¹ See James 2:13 compared to Matthew 6:14,15, James 3:12 compared to Luke 6:43-45, and James 4:10 compared to Matthew 23:12.

² (Walvoord, John F.; Zuck, Roy B., 1989, p. 33)

³ (Henry, 1994, p. 1640)

⁴ The words used by James are “κατίω” and the word it is derived from “ἰός.” Now, κατίω is used only in this passage, but ἰός is used multiple places both in the New Testament and the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament. The word ἰός always carries with it the notion of an undesirable substance that causes harm or damage. It is normally translated as “rust” or “corrosion” in James 5:3 and Ezekiel 24:6,11,12. It is translated as “venom” or “poison” in Romans 3:13; James 3:8; and Psalm 139:4. “βρῶσις” never carries with it this idea, but always has to do with eating or food.

⁵ (Nee, 1989, p. 113)

⁶ (MacArthur, 1985, pp. 409, 410)

⁷ (Strong, 2004) - 3126

DO NOT BE ANXIOUS

MATTHEW 6:25-34

Because of the common translation of the first verse of this section, a simple fact is often overlooked. Every major English translation of which I am aware follows along with the traditional rendering of the twenty-fifth verse of Matthew 6 that goes something like this: “For this reason I say to you, do not be anxious *about your life*...nor about your body...” The rendering of the Greek word “*ψυχή*” as “life” in this passage is not, in my opinion, the best option. This Greek word can just as well be translated using the word “soul,” and to me “soul” makes more sense in the context.

Both “life” and “soul” are reasonable English words to translate the Greek word *ψυχή*. Occasionally *ψυχή* is used simply to refer to the physical/biological life of a person (as in Acts 27:22), and in these instances, of course, “life” is the best English translation.

Most often, though, *ψυχή* is used to refer to an individual’s natural, immaterial *self*, or sometimes to any, all, or any combination of the various aspects of the individual’s natural, immaterial faculties (I say “natural” to distinguish from “spiritual” which involves the human “spirit” or “*πνεῦμα*” which is something entirely different. We will touch on this distinction shortly). In these instances the English word “soul” is the preferable translation. For example, “the soul” is said to experience emotion, such as tremendous sorrow in

Matthew 26:38, as well as great joy in Luke 1:46. The soul also is described as being the domain of one's intellect, as in Acts 15:24.

In certain texts "the soul" is placed in juxtaposition to "the body" for the purpose of contrasting the immaterial self from the material self. This is seen in Matthew 10:28 when Jesus says, "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both body and soul in Gehenna." Notice how soul and body are set in opposition to one another. Sadly, the common translation of Matthew 6:25 obscures the fact that this passage should also be seen as an example of this soul/body, immaterial/material contrast.¹

Worry about Soul and Body

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your soul, what you eat and what you drink, nor about your body, what you wear. Is not the soul more than food and the body than clothing?"

Matthew 6:25

Jesus is not simply warning his disciples against the dangers of excessive worry. Anxiety is indeed understood by most to be a vice, and can even lead to psychological or even physiological health problems. Any competent moral teacher will warn about the dangers of excessive worry. Jesus goes much further.

It is not excessive worry that Jesus teaches against, rather it is *all* worry. Again Jesus is heightening the level of righteousness that he demands, proving more and more the impossibility of its accomplishment using strictly human ability.

Imagine, the disciples have just heard Jesus tell them that they were not to store up earthly treasure, not speaking just of material riches, but of basic necessities. Any reasonable person would know that obedience to this command is beyond his ability, but if anyone

was able to delude himself into thinking he could live that way, imagine the worry that he would immediately be consumed by!

Jesus says, “Do not lay up treasure on earth.”

“Is he serious?” the disciple thinks. “How on earth will I survive? What if something happens? How will I feed and clothe myself?” The acquiescent disciple begins to worry and doubt his ability to obey. Does Jesus soften the teaching and make it more palatable?

“Plus, you are forbidden from worry!” is the next thing out of Jesus’ mouth. It is enough to be told to live day by day with no treasure stored up for the future. Imagine being further told that now you are not allowed to even worry about it! If the first command is extreme, surely the next one is absurd!

It may indeed seem extreme or even absurd at face value, but remember what Jesus told the disciples when instructing them about prayer. The disciples were not to live day to day wondering where their next meal was coming from. Rather they were to be asking, day by day, for their Father to provide their “daily bread.” The simple fact is that, to truly obey Jesus, a disciple must be able to really trust God.

Food and Drink

“Look at the birds of the heaven, that they neither sow, nor reap, nor gather into barns, and your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not more valuable than they? And which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?”

Matthew 5:26,27

Herein lies the answer to obedience to Jesus’ command against worrying: God will provide. The human soul (or life) has the basic requirements of food and water. Every human soul is alike in seeking for the supposed security in providing these basic needs for himself.

From a worldly perspective, it is foolish to abstain from laying up treasures for the future, and downright silly to tell a person to go on that way without worrying about his natural provisions.

However, as Jesus points out, once almighty God is brought into the picture, everything changes. If the disciple will concede that he is indeed God's child, then the ridiculous one is the one who worries about his provisions. "God takes care of the birds², will he not take care of you?" Jesus asks. "Besides, what exactly are you accomplishing with all of your worrying?" Without God's active involvement, Jesus' teaching makes no sense. But with God's involvement factored in, Jesus' way is the only reasonable path to walk.

Clothing

"And about clothing: Why are you worried? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. They neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, not even Solomon, in all his glory, was arrayed like one of these. And if God so dresses the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more you, you of little faith?"

Matthew 6:28-30

As food and drink are for the sustaining of the soul, clothing serves to preserve the body. Clothing is perhaps the most basic necessity that a person may worry about. If a grown man were dropped off naked in a wilderness completely unknown to him, before searching for food, water, or shelter, probably the first item that he would fashion for himself is some form of garment for clothing.

Since the fall, all men have had an innate knowledge of their own nakedness. Man is unique among all of God's creatures in needing a covering for his body. All other animals have something, a coat, hide, feathers, etc. protecting them from the surrounding elements. As the typology in the Genesis account demonstrates, sin created a spiritual nakedness in man that is only rectified by the covering that comes by the shed blood of Christ. Man's natural shame and exposure when physically unclothed provides a constant reminder for him of his spiritual need for the covering that comes from the sacrificial death of another.

Continuing with his message about God's provision for the most basic of human needs, Jesus explains that, just as God provided the covering for Adam and Eve in the garden, which pictures his providing of the spiritual covering for man's sin by the death of his Son, so will God provide for the disciple's physical need of clothing for his body. The disciple is able to obey Jesus' teaching against the laying up of treasure, and is able to do so without worry in his heart, because he knows that God will provide for him.

Now, it must be pointed out here that the provision of God that Jesus is promising his disciples is rightly understood as provision as God sees fit, not as man sees fit. Sadly, very often Christians worry about clothing even beyond as provision for the body's natural need for a covering. Clothing is often a display of man's glory. It is used to show off wealth, power, or privilege. Jesus is of course not saying that God will provide clothing for these or any other self-motivated reasons. Naturally God will not give to his children that which will entice them into greed, lust, pride, or even simple worldliness.

Nor does Jesus say that his disciples will never experience things like nakedness or exposure. A small glimpse into the lives of the apostles and even that of Jesus himself will prove that, at times, God will indeed allow his servants to suffer these things. Jesus does not say that his disciples will at all times have their physical needs met, but he is saying is that God understands their needs. God is in control, and as a general principle, he takes care of his own. No

shame, suffering, pain, or nakedness will ever come into your life that God has not allowed and in which God is not at work for your greater and eternal good. So relax, Christian! Cease with the futile worrying!

Now, if Jesus forbids the worrying about clothing even as a basic need, how much more unbecoming must it be for his disciples to concern themselves with clothing as a display of extravagance! The proper attitude of a disciple is reflected in the words of the apostle Paul, "But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content." Multiple places in the New Testament there is warning against the use of clothing as a display of one's personal glory (see 1 Timothy 2:9; 1 Peter 3:3). The apostles taught the believers instead to "clothe (them)selves with humility" (1 Peter 5:5), focusing on the inward, spiritual adornment of righteousness (1 Timothy 2:10; 1 Peter 3:4). In so teaching, they were of course simply echoing the command of their Master.

Spiritual Concern: The Kingdom and Righteousness

"Therefore, do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For the Gentiles seek for these. For your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these will be added to you."

Matthew 6:31-33

Like his apostles after him, Jesus does not leave the command against earthly worry as simply a negative prohibition. In addition to forbidding the worrying about the external, Jesus also gives a positive

command, telling his disciples with what their desire instead ought to be occupied. We should not be surprised, based on the primary subject of the sermon, that the first matter with which Jesus tells his disciples to be occupied is the matter of “the kingdom.”

Until the current section, Jesus had spent the entire sermon explaining to his disciples the criteria for inheriting the coming kingdom. In this section he has begun to address a potential hindrance for the disciples in their pursuit of that goal, namely the worries and cares of the world. This is the same point made in the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:3-9), when Jesus warns about the seed being sown among the thorns. When giving the proper interpretation of the parable, Jesus explains that the thorns represent “the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches.” Remember that the “seed” in the parable represents “the word of the kingdom” (Matthew 13:19). Jesus explains that the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word so that it bears no fruit (Matthew 13:18-23). These “thorns” are exactly what Jesus is warning about in these passages in Matthew 6:25-33. Throughout the first chapter and a half of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has been giving his disciples “the word of the kingdom,” explaining how they might be able to be found worthy to enter into the joy of their master’s future rule. In this section he warns them about the potential impediment of worldly anxiety.

As we have seen, the two faculties of man to which Jesus refers are the “soul” (Greek: ψυχή) and the “body” (Greek: σῶμα). Jesus expressly forbids anxiety related to either of these two faculties. Allow me to briefly point out that the *soul* and the *body*, combine to form what elsewhere in scripture is called the “flesh.” The *flesh* (Greek: σάρξ) refers to the natural, human nature that all of mankind has inherited from Adam. This fallen, human nature touches both the material and immaterial aspects of each person. Notice that while listing the “works of the flesh” in Galatians 5:19-21 Paul does not only mention the obvious bodily lusts (immorality, impurity, sensuality, drunkenness, orgies, etc.), but he also includes the “soul-

ish” sins like jealousy, anger, and division. In fact, sometimes Paul refers to a person living by the dictates of this human nature as the “natural man” (1 Corinthians 2:14; 15:44,46). The word normally translated “natural” in these verses is actually just the adjective form of the same Greek word translated as soul (ψυχή: “soul”; ψυχικός: “natural” or “soul-ish”). The word soul is used interchangeably in the gospels with the word “self” (compare Matthew 16:26 with Luke 9:25). In short, a person consumed with the worries or pleasures of his soul or his body is a person who cares *for himself*. Paul warns, just as Jesus does in these passages, that those who live in this manner “will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:21).

Just to reiterate, to “not inherit the kingdom of God” does not necessarily mean that the person is *unsaved*. A person can have genuinely been born again and thus be the recipient of eternal life, yet neglect these warnings against being “fleshly” or concerned only for himself. The Corinthian believers, for example, are called “sanctified in Christ Jesus” in 1 Corinthians 1:2, yet in 1 Corinthians 3:1 they are said to be “carnal” (Greek: σάρκινος - “fleshly”). It is indeed possible for people to be *positionally* righteous by virtue of their new-birth through faith in Christ, yet still be *experientially* carnal by walking by the flesh and seeking only their own desires. It is the positional righteousness that secures one’s eternal salvation from the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15), but it is the experiential righteousness that secures one’s position in the coming kingdom (1 Corinthians 6:9,10; Galatians 5:21; Ephesians 5:5).

Now, getting back to the passage before us, if anxiety about one’s soul and body is forbidden, what should the disciple of Jesus be concerned about? Although he does not mention the word specifically, Jesus can be summarized as saying that, rather than worrying about the needs of one’s soul or body, his disciple ought to be concerned with the things of the *spirit*. In telling his disciples to seek the kingdom and righteousness of God, he was telling them to do something that, according to their natural make-up, was actually impossible. Man’s soul and body are powerless in achieving the kind

of righteousness that is of God or that would merit the reward of rulership in God's kingdom (Romans 8:7,8). This is why, as disciples of Jesus, we required a "new birth;" a birth of the *spirit* (John 3:5).³

It is the "spirit" (Greek: πνεῦμα), the third faculty of man (1 Thessalonians 5:23), alive only in believers, that is the region of God's interaction with man. Obedience to this highest ever standard of righteousness is only possible because God himself, in the person of the Holy Spirit, dwells within and strengthens the disciple of Jesus, giving him the power to live the life of God. As Paul says in Romans 8:16, "The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit," and again in Philippians 2:13, "It is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

My paraphrase of what Jesus is saying in this passage goes like this: "Do not worry about the matters of the flesh (body and soul), but worry instead about the matters of the spirit. The temporal, fleshly things will be taken care of as God sees fit. It is the spiritual, eternal matters of God's righteousness being lived out in you that ought to occupy all your concern and energy. This indeed is your only means of attaining to the position of co-rulership with me in the coming kingdom."

Conclusion

"Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble."

Matthew 6:34

Every wise teacher will tell you to "plan for your future." You cannot interview for a job without the interviewer asking you about your "five-year plan," and to be frank, if you reply by saying that you intend to "let tomorrow care for itself" then you are not likely to get the position. From the perspective of a person looking to succeed *in*

this life only, a person looking for some good ethical guidelines to help them find happiness and fulfilment, Jesus' teachings make ***absolutely no sense***. As Paul said with regard to the future resurrection from the dead, if the things that Jesus says about the future kingdom and God's rewarding of those who are faithful to him turn out to be false, then we who seek to obey Jesus' teaching today are "of all people most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:19).

Just as was the case for the "turn the other cheek" passage in chapter five, we see here again that for Jesus' teaching to be truly received and obeyed there is required a daily and even moment by moment interaction of the disciple with God himself. If God's provision, just as with his protection, cannot be counted on, then Jesus' words are foolishness. But if Jesus is right, and there is a kingdom yet to come, and if Jesus will really share the rulership of that kingdom with those servants of his who are faithful and righteous in this age, then it will turn out that the foolishness of God is wiser than men.

¹ While I concede that the concept of the preservation of natural life is clearly present in this section and thus there is good reason to choose the word "life" as the translation for ψυχή, I still take "soul" to be the better translation because it maintains the body/soul contrast that I believe Jesus intended. The fact that in this passage ψυχή clearly carries with it both the "soul" and "life" concepts demonstrates that there is more overlap between these two ideas than is commonly understood. The Recovery Version translators interestingly will sometimes use the combined term "soul-life" to translate ψυχή, though they go along with the traditional "life" here in Matthew 6:25.

² Jesus' referring to the birds as examples of having the needs of "the soul" provided is not out of place. Animals are referred to as living "souls" the same as humans are. Revelation 16:3 uses the same Greek word ψυχή to describe animal life that is used in this passage. The same is true in the LXX of Genesis 1:20. It is the presence of the human spirit, not of the soul, that separates man from beast.

³ In this passage we have both concepts; the irrevocable gift of eternal life, and the conditional reward of entrance into the kingdom. The gift of new birth is the first necessary criteria for attaining to the reward of the kingdom.

7 CONCERNING JUDGMENT

MATTHEW 7:1-6

One aspect of Jesus' teaching that is often overlooked is what he taught *about teaching*. Not wishing for his words to terminate with his immediate audience, Jesus compelled his twelve disciples not only to obey him, but perhaps just as importantly, to instruct others also in the teaching that he gave. Remember in the Great Commission Jesus said, "Make disciples of all nations...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19,20). Likewise Jesus said just a bit earlier in this sermon that it is not only the one who keeps his commands, but it is also the one who "teaches them" who will be called great in the kingdom of the heavens (Matthew 5:19). Clearly teaching other believers is a crucial requirement for a disciple of Jesus.

However, we need to be aware that there are both righteous and unrighteous ways of teaching. There are appropriate as well as inappropriate times and places for a disciple of Jesus to help another disciple to better understand and obey Jesus' words, and there are proper as well as improper methods for doing so. In order to properly obey Jesus' instructions regarding teaching others, there is a certain level of *judgment* required on the part of the disciple. In order to know best how to teach others, a disciple must be able to discern, at least to some degree, another disciple's spiritual condition. This

“judgment” or “discernment” that we are talking about here is both dangerous and necessary. Jesus explains in this next section of his sermon what is and what is not the proper and appropriate place for judgment to be exercised by his disciples.

Jesus will discuss three different occasions where judgment is called for, each of which will require a different response from his disciples. These three instances are: official judgment regarding the world (7:1,2), personal judgment among fellow believers (7:3-5), and personal judgment regarding the wicked (7:6). We will start with the first: official judgment as it relates to the world.

Official Judgment Concerning Worldly Affairs

Judge Not

“Do not judge, so that you are not judged...”

Matthew 7:1

While the concept of “judgment” is the theme for this entire section, the Greek words that are normally translated as “judge” (κρίνω) or “judgment” (κρίνω, κρίμα, κρίσις) are used only in this first subsection about worldly judgment and not in either of the two subsections to follow. There is a very good reason for this. The word “judge” (κρίνω, etc.), throughout the New Testament, is most often used to refer to official, public or civil judgment, and I see it as carrying that same sense in this passage. Though it is a common understanding among commentators, Jesus is actually *not* here forbidding the personal discernment of another’s moral behavior. Rather he is in fact forbidding judgment in the normal, official sense of the word.

Though according to my study the majority of commentators seem to reject the view I am here taking, I would only ask that you hear it out and see if this is an example of letting “God be true though every man a liar.” Let me be absolutely clear, my contention is that, in this

passage, Jesus is not discussing interpersonal judgment about another's behavior. Rather, Jesus is forbidding his disciples from *sitting in the seat of a civil magistrate* (i.e. a judge). Allow me to explain.

In the crucifixion account found in the gospel of John, when the Jews brought Jesus before Pontius Pilate, notice the wording of the conversation. Pilate's response to those seeking to have Jesus killed was to tell them to "*judge him by your own law.*" The Jews objected by stating that their own law did not allow them to *put someone to death* (John 18:31). "Judgment" in that passage referred to the sentencing and carrying to execution an official, magisterial decision. Likewise, in Exodus 18:13, Moses, when sitting as magistrate over the nation of Israel, is described as "judging" (LXX: κρίνω) the people. This is what is normally meant by the word "judge."¹ While it is true that there are times when this word is used to mean personal discernment in a non-magisterial sense (see Acts 20:16, Titus 3:12), it is rare enough that we can assume that in these cases it is being used figuratively with its literal sense remaining magisterial judgment.²

So why does this understanding of the word κρίνω matter so much? Well, often this verse is quoted by people trying to warn against looking down on others because of their sinful, or perceived to be sinful actions. This seems to be the opinion of the bulk of the commentaries, or at least of those with which I am familiar. Please do not misunderstand. I am not saying that this would be a bad warning to give. In fact Jesus will discuss that idea in the very next section in Matthew 7:3-5. But what I *am* saying is that this is *not* what Jesus is saying in this verse.

In this verse Jesus gives no mere *warning* against judgment. Jesus is good about making it very clear when he is giving a direct command and when he is simply giving an instructional warning. Remember the example of his instruction concerning publically visible acts of righteousness in Matthew 6:1. That was an example of a warning rather than a command, and it is very reasonable because at times public acts of righteousness are necessary. Jesus merely

warned his disciples that the praise of men cannot become their inner motivation.

In this passage, however, Jesus does not say, “beware when judging” or “be careful how you judge.” Rather, Jesus emphatically commands, “Do not judge.” Almost every commentary that I have come across misses this point. They all wish to interpret this passage as saying, to use the words of Calvin’s commentary, “These words of Christ do not contain an absolute prohibition from judging.”³ Because Calvin and many others misunderstand the word “judge” (Greek: κρίνω) in this passage to mean interpersonal discernment of another’s righteousness or unrighteousness, they cannot see Jesus as emphatically forbidding judgment. But a plain reading of the passage makes it clear that that is exactly what Jesus is doing.

I believe that there is also a deeper reason that many commentators cannot acknowledge that Jesus is giving a full prohibition against judging. Simply put, they cannot do so because their doctrinal systems will not allow it. To take Jesus to be forbidding judgment in the normal, civil/magisterial sense cuts strongly against much that has been taught in various religious traditions. Lange says of the passage, “Least of all does (the command to ‘judge not’) apply to the sentence pronounced by a judge (who should always bear in mind that he is under the holy law of God).”⁴ In Lange’s mind, a Christian holding the office of judge has an obligation to make right judgment according to the “law of God” (assumed here to refer to that given to Israel through Moses). Therefore it would be a contradiction to tell him to withhold judgment altogether. It seems that for many it is unthinkable that Jesus was actually forbidding his disciples from holding this type of office altogether.

It should not be unthinkable, though, especially considering the one other time the word κρίνω is used in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:40 Jesus says, “To the one who would sue (Greek: κρίνω - “judge”) you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.” It should be clear to all that Jesus, in that passage, forbids his

disciples from even making a claim on their own property in a law court. Is it too far to assume that Jesus would also have his disciples refrain from being the mediator of justice in that same court?

Under the Law there was indeed a civil court system that the Israelites maintained, and thus certain from among them were in charge of maintaining a system of justice. Not so, however, with the disciples of Jesus. Mercy, not judgment, is what is required of God's people today.

There are perhaps some who do not see mercy and judgment as being in such opposition to one another. A good judge, a Christian judge, they might say, would do well to maintain justice to some degree, while still maintaining a heart-attitude of mercy. Indeed the Old Testament scriptures, while having provisions regarding approved civil judgment, also contain certain admonitions toward mercy (Proverbs 11:17; Micah 6:8). Never, though, are these instructions toward mercy given to those who are actually wielding the magisterial power. In fact, quite the opposite is true.

In the chapter regarding civil judgment in Israel, those holding the office of magistrate were strictly forbidden from allowing mercy to effect the performance of their duty: "The elders of the city shall send and take him (the premeditated manslayer) from there, and hand him over to the avenger of blood, so that he may die. *Your eye shall not pity him*, but you shall purge the guilt of innocent blood from Israel" (Deuteronomy 19:12,13; see also vs 21; 13:8,9; 25:12). According to the Mosaic Law, as well as common sense, it undoes the proper sense of justice and respect for law if a magistrate is given the discretion to allow his pity and empathy to affect his decisions. A good judge ought never to forgo judgment in favor of mercy. Therefore, it stands to reason that the disciples of Jesus, those who are called, in this age, to be unceasingly merciful, would be forbidden from taking the magisterial seat.

Robert Govett is one of the few who takes the difficult yet correct view of this passage. Govett makes this observation: "Even the world seems to feel an unseemliness and some sort of inconsistency,

when clergymen sit on the bench of magistrates. They seem to own, that there is something unfit in *his* passing the sentence of justice on the offender from whose lips should proceed glad tidings of great joy to the sinner. But that which the world would confine to the *clergyman*, the enlightened believer sees to be nothing but the true standing of every renewed man in Christ Jesus. For every believer is God's priest, and witness of the glad tidings of peace by the blood of the cross."⁵

Motivation of Contingent, Future Judgment

“...for with the judgment you judge you will be judged, and with the measurement you use you will be measured.”

Matthew 7:2

It is very important to notice that immediately after forbidding his disciples from judging, Jesus brings up the notion of the future judgment that they will receive from him (with its kingdom implications). This will provide further confirmation that we ought to take the plain meaning of the preceding passage as a direct command against magisterial judgment. Let me explain.

Jesus says that the judgment his disciples use against others is the standard that will be applied to them when they are judged. Now firstly we need to ask, When exactly does this judgment of the disciple take place? Certainly Jesus cannot be referring to the eternal judgment upon sin, as that was dealt with finally and completely on the cross at Calvary. One does not receive forgiveness in that respect through having proper interaction with other people. Forgiveness in that sense is secured only by faith in Jesus. The judgment being referred to in this verse Jesus explicitly says is determined by the *works* of the disciple; specifically here by the disciple's judgment or lack of judgment against others. Based on all that we have heard in the Sermon on the Mount so far, we ought to conclude that Jesus is

again referring to the pre-kingdom Judgment Seat of Christ that will determine the inheritance or loss thereof for his disciples in the coming millennial kingdom.

So if that is the *when*, then the next question we need to ask is, *How* will this principle be worked out? How does a disciple's judgment standard being used against him apply to this future judgment? Now, as we have seen, most commentators see Jesus as referring to *discernment* regarding someone else's righteousness or unrighteousness. But I ask you, does this translate directly to Jesus' future judgment? Think about it. Based on what we have read so far, is it true that the person with the least sensitivity to the good or evil of those around him will be in the best position during the Judgment Seat of Christ? Will Jesus be less alert to a disciple's disobedience so long as that disciple is undiscerning of the unrighteous deeds of others?

When you think of it that way, it does not really add up. Jesus will not simply *notice* or *comment on* the behavior of his disciples when they stand before him. As has been shown since the beginning of the sermon, Jesus gives retribution, both positive and negative, to his disciples based upon their obedience to all that he has commanded. Therefore, his statement "with the judgment you judge you will be judged" cannot be referring to a simple mental or spoken evaluation of another's behavior.

When we stand before Jesus, it will not be our *awareness* of the sins of others that will be judged, it will be our *reaction* to those sins that will affect our own reward or discipline. It is not whether we are aware of the sinfulness of the one who takes our tunic, it is the actual going to court to demand it back that Jesus forbids (Matthew 5:40). Jesus will judge his disciples on whether they struck back, sued, or even held hatred in their hearts toward those who sinned against them.

Up to this point in the sermon Jesus had only mentioned reaction within interpersonal situations. In Matthew 7:2 Jesus says that the same principle applies to magisterial judgment as well. In this

passage he shows that to condemn the wicked of this age to prison or execution will also affect the disciple's future judgment, even if done under a just system as a civil magistrate. Be warned! The standard by which you judge, *in whatever the context*, Jesus says you will likewise be judged!

Having already escaped the eternal penalty for sin through faith in Jesus, all believers now have only the pre-kingdom Judgment Seat of Christ remaining as a judgment for them. On that day all your works and even your inner motivations will be laid bare (1 Corinthians 4:5). There is only one means of accruing mercy for yourself at that judgment, and that is to be merciful to others today. James gives this same warning. He reminds us that "judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy." (James 2:13) If our behavior is defined by judgment today, we should expect the strictest judgment also then. But James also encourages us that "mercy triumphs over judgment," showing that our mercy toward others will cause the righteous Judge to also show mercy toward us.

It goes without saying that this ought to motivate believers to be the most merciful people on earth. Think of the testimony it would be of the truth of the gospel if Christians were known by all as the most merciful of people. "Even when persecuted, they only bless others. They refuse even to claim in court what should rightfully be theirs! Perhaps there is merit to the radical mercy that they claim that their God offers to men."

A Common Objection

While I am not entirely alone in my understanding of these few verses, there can be no doubt that much, if not most of systematized Christian doctrine interprets Jesus' words regarding judgment quite differently from the strict literalness that I am espousing here.

The most common objection that I hear generally goes something like this: "How can you expect the world to carry on if all righteous Christians took Jesus to be forbidding them from magisterial office? Indeed society itself would soon crumble. The positions that legally

and rightfully carry with them the exercising of force over other people are the positions that most importantly require just, godly men to occupy them.”

How are we to answer this objection? Firstly, by pointing out that the disciple’s calling is one of “salt and light” (Matthew 5:13-16), not judge and jury. Jesus speaks of our *influence* on the surrounding world as being the agent of preserving elements of justice and righteousness (see also 1 Peter 2:12 and Ephesians 5:11-14). It is the purity of the believers’ devotion to the Lord and their prayers for those who rule over them that preserve the world and society from deteriorating into lawlessness. Nowhere in the New Testament are Christians told to extend this influence into the realm of judicial coercion.

Secondly, I must point out that those who make this objection are ignoring the fact that God’s sovereign mercy has allowed many civilizations to peacefully exist and prosper with hardly any Christian influence whatsoever. Ancient Greece, for example, had centuries of peaceful existence without a trace of Christian influence. China, likewise, had over two millennia of civilization before any knowledge of Christianity reached them. While Christian influence no doubt helps to preserve a decent and peaceful society, we cannot make the claim that it is necessary for one.

More important than either of these two points, however, is the fact that biblical prophecy makes it clear that God has sovereignly placed “the Gentiles,” not the Church, nor even the Jews, in the current position of political power. This is important because the Jews, more so even than the Church, might feel that they have legitimate reasons for thinking that God would put them in the position of magisterial ruler.

The kingdom of Israel was, for a time, God’s chosen instrument for expressing God’s authority on the earth. God’s intention for man’s ultimate involvement in sharing his rule dates back to the beginning of creation. God told Adam and Eve to “fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28). The Lord promised to Eve that she would

have a “seed” who would ultimately bruise the head of God’s enemy, “the serpent” (Genesis 3:15). To Abraham God promised a “seed” through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 22:18). This seed was, in one sense, to be Christ himself (Galatians 3:16b). Yet, in another sense, Abraham’s seed referred to Abraham’s *physical descendants*, the nation of Israel. Israel was a chosen “kingdom” (Exodus 19:6), for a time, privileged to be the unique nation used by God to express God’s authority on the earth.

God promised to King David that his ruling throne would be established forever (2 Samuel 7:12,13). Jesus Christ himself is, of course, that “Son of David” who will sit on that throne (Luke 1:32,33). However, if we read the promise to David carefully we will find that there were also aspects of it which specifically applied to King Solomon, David’s immediate heir. Solomon serves as a *type* or *picture* of Jesus’ future reign as the prince of peace, and the one with boundless wisdom, who blesses all the nations of the earth (1 Chronicles 22:9; 1 Kings 4:29). However, when the nation of Israel rebelled against the Lord, their status as the predicted blessing to the nations gradually went out. Even Solomon himself began to lead the nation of Israel into idolatry.

After Solomon’s reign, the kingdom became divided, and the succeeding kings, with few exceptions, led the nations of Israel and Judah into wickedness and idolatry. Eventually, God caused the Gentile nations of Assyria and Babylon to conquer Israel’s northern and southern kingdoms. The Babylonians destroyed the temple and carried off all of its contents to Babylon. This demonstrated that God’s presence had left Israel and that Israel had temporarily been removed from her position of expressing God’s rule on the earth.

Without getting into too much detail, I would like to explain that I say Israel was “temporarily” removed from her position because the promise to David was that his throne “would be established forever” (2 Samuel 7:16). While Solomon’s reign and the subsequent descendants of David were a partial fulfilment of this promise, the return of the Lord Jesus, son of David, to reign over the earth for a

thousand years and then in the new heavens and new earth into eternity will be the final fulfilment of this promise (Revelation 20:4; 22:4).

However, there is no denying that, for a time, the earth was prophesied to be ruled over by Gentile powers. After Israel was taken into captivity, God revealed to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, how the coming “times of the Gentiles” (Luke 21:24) would play out. God gave the king a dream and then interpreted the dream through the Jewish prophet Daniel (Daniel 2:31-45). Daniel explained to Nebuchadnezzar that there would be four successive Gentile kingdoms, Babylon being the first, that would rule over that focal region of the civilized world. For a determined period of time, the rulership of the earth would be given to the Gentile powers. Daniel continues on to explain, however, that there will be a day when the Gentile powers are finally conquered, and in their place will be put “a kingdom that shall never be destroyed.”

Daniel makes a point of saying that, once the dream was revealed to him, he “blessed the God of heaven” (Daniel 2:19) prior to giving the explanation to Nebuchadnezzar. It is interesting to note that during the explanation, Daniel constantly refers to the Lord as “the God of heaven” (Daniel 2:17-45). It seems that Daniel wishes to make clear that, although God’s earthly rule and testimony have been suspended, and although his earthly people are currently held captive by another world power, God still reigns in heaven and is still in complete control over the kingdoms of the earth (Daniel 2:19-23). Daniel explains that the kingdom which will eventually destroy the Gentile kingdoms will be one that is setup, again, by “the God of heaven” (Daniel 2:44).

Considering the phraseology within this prophecy, it is no wonder that the people of Israel were stirred by the message of John the Baptist that the “kingdom of the heavens” was at hand. All four of the Gentile kingdoms prophesied by Daniel had arisen, the fourth of which was the mighty Roman Empire. When John, as a prophet of God, declared that the heavenly kingdom was drawing near, the

natural expectation of the people of Israel was that the present earthly kingdom (Rome) was about to be crushed and the kingdom of Israel, the kingdom of “the God of heaven,” was about to be restored (Acts 1:6b).

However, as Jesus’ teaching makes abundantly clear, this heavenly kingdom is not to be inherited by the wicked. The people who enter the kingdom are the righteous, as described in the beatitudes at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. This is why John’s and Jesus’ messages were not, “*Rejoice!* For the kingdom is at hand,” but rather, “*Repent!* For the kingdom is at hand.” Israel’s place as “God’s kingdom on earth” was taken away as a result of the spiritual apostasy of the nation. Now the spiritual condition of the children of Israel will need to be one of righteousness toward the Lord before they can again take their place as the heavenly kingdom on the earth.

Because the nation of Israel largely rejected Jesus’ call to repentance, the establishment of the kingdom, with Jesus as the rightful ruler, was deferred for a time. Jesus explained this delay of the kingdom’s establishment through a parable (Luke 19:11-15),⁶ though it seems the disciples did not fully understand at the time, since prior to Jesus’ ascension, the twelve were still expecting the kingdom of Israel to be restored immediately (Acts 1:6). Upon leaving Jerusalem the final time, Jesus prophesied that the nation of Israel would not see him offered as their king again until they were in the spiritual condition to say of him, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”

So Israel, prophesied to be the heavenly kingdom on earth, is for a time put under Gentile rule. Looking back at our passage in Matthew 7:1, can you see that it may not be completely out of character for Jesus to forbid his people from sitting as a civil magistrate? God did it with the nation of Israel when they were taken captive into Babylon. For a time, God has placed the Gentiles in the position of political power. Neither the Jews nor the Church are to attempt to displace them. There will be a day when the Lord returns, and at that point he will rule the nations (Revelation 19:15), and those from

among the redeemed whom he deems worthy will co-rule with him (Revelation 2:26,27). Until that time, though, Jesus instructs his disciples to “judge not,” but rather to be exclusively devoted to mercy, just as Jesus is during this day of grace.

Interpersonal Judgment among Believers

As we continue through this section regarding “judgment” we will find that, while Jesus continues with the theme of various forms of judgment, he does not continue to use the same Greek word. “Judgment” (Greek: κρίνω), in its strict sense, has been expressly forbidden. But in this upcoming section, Jesus will continue on by addressing judgment in the interpersonal sense. Now that our subject moves to interpersonal relationships rather than judicial authority, it may be wise for us to use the word “discernment” rather than “judgment,” as we are here talking about something quite distinct from what Jesus had forbidden in Matthew 7:1.

Discernment of a Brother’s Sin

“And why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the log in your own eye?”

Matthew 7:3

In this section, Jesus essentially tells his disciples that their attitude should be the exact opposite of the way men behave naturally. Men naturally tend to look with far greater strictness on the faults of others than they do toward their own. There is almost always swift condemnation of others, especially when a fault of theirs causes personal offense. However, whenever one’s own fault is pointed out, it is usually only a moment before an excuse or justification is found for whatever behavior or attitude has been called into question.

Jesus, on the other hand, refers to any fault or sin that one can find in someone else as simply a “speck.” While irritating, a speck in one’s eye is certainly no emergency. Most daily activities can actually still be carried out, albeit with some difficulty, while one has a speck in his eye. By comparison, a disciple of Jesus is taught to view his own sin and failure as being of far greater importance. If your brother’s sin is a speck in his eye, then your own is a log in your own eye.

Imagine the absurdity of a man with a wooden plank the size of a tree lodged into his eye taking any notice of the fact that another man is trying to blink a piece of sawdust out of his eye. This is what Jesus says it is like for one believer to notice another’s sin when there is still sin in his own life. Christian maturity leads more and more to a believer having greater strictness with himself and greater mercy toward others.

Corrective Action

“Or how will you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck out of your eye’? And, behold, the log is in your eye! Hypocrite! First remove the log out of your eye, then you will see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother’s eye.”

Matthew 7:4,5

First Jesus addressed the attitude of his disciples toward theirs and their brother’s sin. Now he addresses the action to be taken regarding those sins. There is a time to “remove the speck out of your brother’s eye,” but it should be of secondary importance compared to the “log” being removed from one’s own eye. Christian accountability, the helping of one another with escaping the snares of sin, does have its place. However, because of the tendency for men to see others’

failures as far greater than their own, Jesus tells us to treat with far greater severity our own sins.

The apostle Paul says something very similar in Galatians 6:1. He says that, if any believer is caught in a trespass, it is the ones who are “spiritual” who ought to work to restore him. A carnal man trying to help another carnal man will only lead to pride and greater sin. Even to the spiritual ones, Paul warns to help the sinning brother in “a spirit of gentleness,” and to be “looking at yourself, lest you too be tempted” (Galatians 6:1).

In that passage in Galatians 6, Paul was simply describing Jesus’ concept of the log and the speck in practical terms. Before any action is taken to help a brother with his sin, the disciple must first be certain that his own spiritual condition is correct. Even after that point, the one in the position of “judging” or better “discerning” the spiritual condition of his brother, must the whole time be looking back to take notice of his own.

Dealing with those Deemed Wicked

“Do not give⁷ the holy to dogs and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them with their feet and turn and tear you up.”

Matthew 7:6

We have in this passage a syntax structure that is called a “chiasm.” In his book *Basic Bible Interpretation*, Roy B. Zuck explains that in a chiasm pattern “elements one and four in one or more verses are parallel in thought, and points two and three are parallel in thought.”⁸ In other words, a chiasm is a syntax structure where words or phrases follow an A,B,B¹,A¹ pattern.

Notice, in this passage, the first thing warned against is giving “the holy to dogs” (A), and the next is throwing “pearls before pigs” (B). Then, when describing the consequences, the order is reversed. Jesus first says they may “trample them with their feet,” something more applicable to pigs than to dogs (B'), and then that they will “turn and tear you up,” something more applicable to dogs than to pigs (A'). The outline looks like this:

- A. Give the holy to dogs
- B. Throw pearls before pigs
- B'. Trample them with their feet
- A'. Turn and tear you up

The two classes of wicked men that Jesus warns his disciples about are categorized as “dogs” and “pigs.” Dogs, according to the Mosaic Law, were unclean animals because they neither “part the hoof” nor “chew the cud” (Leviticus 11:3). Pigs likewise were unclean, because though they do “part the hoof,” they do not “chew the cud” (Leviticus 11:7). In other words, the pig appears clean outwardly, but is unclean inwardly, while the dog is unclean without even any appearance of being clean. The two animals in Jesus’ illustration represent two categories of wicked men.

Dogs

We should understand those pictured by the dogs to be worldly men who are neither righteous nor give any pretense toward righteousness. In Revelation 22:15 “the dogs” are described as being in line with “sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters.” Many commentators see in this illustration a piece of meat from the altar of the temple being thrown out to the wild dogs outside.⁹ Jesus warns that giving “the holy” to men like this will cause them to attack you. It seems that what Jesus is referring to “the holy” as representing is

the high standard of righteousness that Jesus is bringing in his teaching.

Jesus was very different from the simple moral teacher that many in the world today wish to make him into. As we have seen a number of times already, Jesus' teaching makes no sense for a person who does not believe in the spiritual realities of God, resurrection, and a future kingdom. In this passage Jesus actually warns that it is dangerous for a believer to attempt to instruct wicked men in his spiritual standard of righteousness. It should be no surprise that Jesus would give such a warning, considering the fact that he has given very specific instructions regarding how to interact with evil men, and in each case the disciple leaves himself in a state of utter vulnerability (see Matthew 5:39-42). While a disciple of Jesus should have the faith to know that God can and will protect him in these kinds of circumstances, he should not therefore put God to the test by telegraphing his vulnerability to men who would be likely to exploit it.

Notice how powerful, yet balanced Jesus' teaching is. While disciples of Jesus are instructed to teach other disciples to obey Jesus' words (Matthew 5:19; 28:20), they are warned to not be careless in bringing these instructions to unbelievers. Likewise earlier they were told to "let your light shine before men" so that God might be glorified (Matthew 5:16), yet were also warned to "be careful not to perform your righteousness before men" in case the praise of men should become their motivation (Matthew 6:1). Similarly, Jesus said, "Do not resist the one who is evil" and "turn the other cheek" (Matthew 5:39). However, lest anyone should take him to be advocating a self-glorifying martyr complex, Jesus also instructs his disciples to pray, "Deliver us from the evil one" (Matthew 6:13). While Jesus' teaching is, in one sense, radical to the point of being humanly impossible, it is at the same time profoundly balanced and remarkably reasonable.

Pigs

The other category of people whom Jesus discusses consists of those who are referred to by him as “pigs.” While not so much an animal to be feared like the dog, a pig is undesirable for its own reasons. A pig was unclean under the law just as the dog was. However, externally, a pig could have the appearance of being clean since the pig does “part the hoof.” Therefore the pigs in Jesus’ teaching picture unrighteous men who perhaps give some pretense toward righteousness.

There are those who, by the world’s standard, are difficult to distinguish from godly Christians. They can be polite, well-respected, and even considered by outsiders to be devoutly religious. It is only upon closer inquiry that one finds out that their heart’s desire is set on worldly and carnal things with little or no care for the things of God. Pigs, in my view, can picture people who are well-mannered and even religious, but have no genuine faith in Christ; or possibly they can picture those who truly believe, but are living carnally, walking according to the flesh, while putting on some pretext of piety. In either case the person may appear at first glance to be godly, but upon further inquiry turns out to care nothing for the things of the Lord. Paul describes these kinds of people in Philippians 3:19, perhaps implying they may even be found within the assembly.

Jesus warns against “throwing your pearls” before men of this type. There is some difficulty in determining what exactly Jesus is saying these “pearls” represent.

Some commentators see the “pearls” as representing the gospel. Calvin takes them this way, and thus feels the need to harmonize this passage with Jesus’ words in Mark 16:15: “Preach the gospel to every creature.” Calvin squares the two commands by making the pigs to whom the pearls of the gospel are not to be thrown into “those who, by clear evidences, have manifested a hardened contempt of God, so that their disease appears to be incurable.”¹⁰ MacArthur, taking a similar view, compares this teaching with the command in

Matthew 10:14 to “shake the dust off your feet” when gospel preaching has been consistently rejected.¹¹ The problem with this view is that Jesus’ command is not, “Do not keep throwing¹² your pearls,” as though it will take time for the pig to prove himself to be a pig. With the gospel, believers proclaim to “all men,” knowing that only some will respond (1 Corinthians 9:22). Of the pearls, Jesus says simply, “Do not throw...” implying that the pig is able to be identified prior to the pearls being thrown.

Matthew Henry takes a position which makes more sense based on the context of the command. Henry sees the pearls, as well as the “holy things” mentioned earlier in the verse, as being the type of edifying correction spoken about in the previous verses.¹³ He sees Jesus as saying, “Only rebuke your brother after your own sin is dealt with (vs 3-5), and as for the wicked, it would be fruitless and even dangerous to attempt to correct their behavior this way at all” (vs 6). While this view does better at considering the context of the verse and staying more accurate to the text, I still believe that this is unlikely to be Jesus’ true meaning.

When considering what the pearls rightly represent in this illustration, we would do well to consider where else in the scriptures pearls are mentioned, and perhaps the most memorable place is the gates of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:21. The presence of pearls in this holy, heavenly city, in which the people of God dwell once sin and death are finally eradicated, makes Matthew Henry’s contention that the pearls represent rebuke for sin unlikely. How can they picture rebuke for sin if they are most notably present in the city where sin no longer exists?

It is very interesting to note that pearls, though mentioned eight different times in the New Testament, are never mentioned in the Old Testament.¹⁴ It seems that the pearls represent things that are both hidden and heavenly, as the revelations given in the New Testament are described as being (Ephesians 3:4-10). Our understanding of the scriptural meaning of “pearls” will be helped by looking at H.A. Ironside’s commentary of Matthew 13:44-46. He discusses his own

view of the two parables found in that passage, the second of which discusses a merchant in search of pearls:

“First, He (Jesus) tells of a treasure hid in a field. Remembering the ‘the field is the world,’ we ask, What treasure was here hidden? All through the Old Testament, Israel is so pictured. They formed Jehovah’s ‘peculiar treasure.’ To them Christ came from glory, but the time had not yet arrived for His acceptance; so He ‘hideth’ it, and then went to the cross to pay the purchase-price for the whole world-the field, not merely the treasure. Hidden still that treasure remains, but soon it shall be brought forth from its hiding-place, and He shall acknowledge it as His own. ‘They shall be Mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up My peculiar treasure’ (Mal. 3:17, literal rendering). *It is the earthly aspect of the kingdom...*”¹⁵

This notion of the treasure hidden in the field picturing Israel, God’s earthly people, temporarily being “hidden” in the world makes an important contrast to how Ironside sees the next parable about the pearl being properly interpreted:

“The merchantman seeking goodly pearls pictures the value of the true kingdom in His own eyes. For He, not the sinner, is the merchantman....He who was rich, for our sakes became poor, leaving the glory that He had with the Father before ever the earth was, and coming into this scene to seek a goodly pearl to adorn His diadem forever. One pearl He found, and that of great price! *It is the heavenly aspect of the kingdom*-the Church for which He gave Himself. At Calvary’s cross He paid the full price of its purchase; and now none shall dispute His title to that Church which He hath purchased with His own blood. He ‘loved the Church, and gave Himself for it’....Soon it will be removed from its surroundings of evil filthiness, and be placed in its proper setting, to be the chief ornament of His crown throughout the eternal ages.”¹⁶

This pearl, the Church, according to Ironside, is a unique, heavenly creation, which remained a mystery hidden for ages. Even now having been revealed by the apostles (Ephesians 3:4-6) the Church is very little understood by the men of the world. Jesus now

has his pearl, purchased by his own blood. Similarly, the teaching here in Matthew 7:6 demonstrates that we believers also have our own pearls. All who serve the Lord have “pearls” of heavenly blessings and revelation, often gained through suffering and trial.

Something interesting to note about these pearls, is that believers do not wish to keep them for themselves. They want to share them with others. We all know the joy we have in sharing heavenly truths with other seeking believers. A profound, heavenly insight gained from studying one of the New Testament epistles, or perhaps a spiritual experience of the Lord’s strength or love, is strangely always accompanied by a desire to share this treasure with others. A lover of pearls wants them on display, not hidden away in a safe! So too, Christians desire to share their deep, spiritual experiences with one another.

Knowing this to be the case, Jesus offers the warning here in Matthew 7:6. Many believers have had the sad experience that Jesus is here warning about. If someone, no matter how refined or religious, knows nothing of the genuine experience of the Lord, any attempt to share the precious and mysterious Christian fellowship with them will be met with, at best, misunderstanding or indifference. Even those who may truly know the Lord, and even externally keep up an appearance of godliness, if internally they are not in communion with the Lord himself, any attempt at sharing precious, heavenly treasures with them will lead to frustration and discouragement- their pearls will be “trampled underfoot.”

Jesus graciously desires to spare his disciples of this discouragement. Just as he warns about the vicious attacks likely to come from wicked men, Jesus warns about the simple rejection that will come from those without a spiritual sensitivity. Let us, then, beware of both giving “the holy to dogs” as well as “throwing pearls before pigs.”

¹ In English we rarely if ever use “judge” as a verb when referring to judgment in this sense. An English speaker, if he were trying to convince his friend not to “judge” in this sense, would be far more likely to say, “I don’t think you should *be a judge*” than to say, “I don’t think you should judge.” Thus, in English, when someone uses “judge” as a verb, it is usually understood to mean interpersonal judgment. This has caused a great deal of confusion with Matthew 7:1, because in the English, it sounds like Jesus is simply saying “Don’t judge” in the modern sense of the expression. The Greek use of the word is very different.

² To give a modern example, imagine three friends were deciding whether to have Chinese or Italian food for dinner. The first argues for Chinese, while the second for Italian. Assuming the third will break the tie and thus make the final decision, one of the first two may turn to him and say, “Well, Judge, what’s the verdict?” The words “judge” and “verdict” would not be assumed to have lost their normal, literal definition simply because they had here been used figuratively. The same should be understood about κρίνω and its usage in the New Testament. “Judge” means “judge” unless there is some contextual reason to take it figuratively.

³ (Calvin, J., & Pringle, W., 2010)

⁴ (Lange, J.P. & Schaff, P., 2008) (First parentheses mine, second parentheses his)

⁵ (Govett, Sermon on the Mount, 1984, p. 246) (Italics his)

⁶ Specifically Luke 19:11 makes it clear that this was indeed Jesus’ purpose in sharing the parable: “But as they heard these things, he proceeded to tell a parable, because he was near Jerusalem, and they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately.”

⁷ The English translation here seems to indicate that Jesus is giving another direct command similar to the one given in 7:1. The Greek actually says something different. The verb “give” is not in the strict imperative form; it is in the subjunctive form (used to express the command in a more mild fashion). Unfortunately, the difference between the strict imperative and the subjunctive (in an imperative use) is difficult to articulate in an English translation. With the strict imperative form (e.g. Matthew 7:1 – “Do not judge...”), there is a more clear indication of a direct command. The subjunctive (e.g. Matthew 7:6 – “Do not give...do not throw...”), is more of a helpful warning given for the benefit of the hearer. The instruction given here in 7:6 is perhaps more similar to the warning given in 6:1 (“Beware of practicing your righteousness before men...”), than the command given in 7:1 (“Do not judge...”).

⁸ (Zuck, 1991)

⁹ See the commentary on this passage in the following commentaries: (Wilkin R. N., 2010), (Wiersbe, 1996), (Lange, J.P. & Schaff, P., 2008), along with many others.

¹⁰ (Calvin, J., & Pringle, W., 2010)

¹¹ (MacArthur, 1985, pp. 438, 439)

¹² The command, along with the one regarding “giving the holy to dogs,” is given in the aorist tense. If it were in either the present or imperfect tense one could make the argument for there being an implied “continuous” aspect (i.e. “do not be giving”; “do not be throwing”). The aorist or “undefined” tense makes the “point action” aspect (“do not give”; “do not throw”) more likely.

¹³ (Henry, 1994)

¹⁴ Some translations do in fact have pearls mentioned in Job 28:18, but I take the translations of the words mentioned there as being the coral, crystal, and rubies used in the 1901 ASV. The LXX does not use the Greek word “μαργαρίτας,” translated here in Matthew 7:6 as “pearls,” anywhere in the entire Old Testament.

¹⁵ (Ironside, 1938, pp. 30, 31) (*Italics mine*)

¹⁶ (Ironside, 1938, pp. 31, 32) (*Italics mine*)



HOW TO GAIN THIS RIGHTEOUSNESS

MATTHEW 7:7-12

Through Moses the nation of Israel had been given by God the most thorough and just set of laws ever conceived. When viewed within its proper context and with an understanding of its underlying purpose, the Law of Moses can be recognized as being the single greatest code of civil government ever written.

The Mosaic Law is only seen as wrong, weak, or ineffectual when it is being looked at to fulfill a purpose for which it was not given. The Law did not make anyone righteous. It was not given with the intention of making anyone righteous. The Law provided a righteous civil government in order to govern and thus help to preserve a sinful, fleshly people. This is why there are certain necessary concessions within the Law that are actually different than God's perfect and original standard of righteousness.¹ Do not look at these, however, as errors or flaws within the Law itself as given by God, nor in Moses' transcription of that Law. With respect to the purpose for which it was given, the Law was complete and without error.

Sadly, however, the Law *is* often viewed wrongly. The Law is often viewed wrongly in one of two ways. Firstly, the Law has been

at times viewed as a means of justification (i.e. being made righteous) before God. A great deal of Protestant New Testament commentary has correctly explained that the Law is insufficient for this task because it presents a standard to which none who have inherited Adam's fallen flesh can measure up.

More important to understand when considering our present study, though, is the second way of wrongly viewing the Law. This involves viewing the Law as a code by which to govern or guide a believer's personal, Christian conduct. The Law is equally insufficient for this task. Those who have received the free justification from God which comes through faith in Christ are no longer men of "flesh" but, spiritually, are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). The Law, given to and designed for men of flesh, is therefore completely unsuited for them.

Now, when considering what the Law *cannot* do, we ought naturally to be directed toward what Jesus *can* and *did* do. We know that what the Law could not do as far as man's justification is concerned, Jesus accomplished by his finished work on the cross (Romans 8:3). When looking into the Sermon on the Mount, we can see that what the Law cannot do for us with respect to guidance in righteous living, Jesus is also able to accomplish.

Jesus' work with respect to helping his people in their experiential righteousness is two-fold. Firstly, Jesus *taught* his people the principles for righteous living during the course of his earthly ministry. Perhaps nowhere is this teaching given more clearly than here in the Sermon on the Mount.

Beyond simply giving this teaching, however, Jesus secondly, and even more importantly, offered *help* to his disciples in obeying this teaching. After his resurrection, Jesus gave the person of the Holy Spirit to empower his people to do the work that he taught them to do during his lifetime. While the Law simply contained regulations for the nation of Israel, along with warnings about consequences for failures, Jesus provides for his disciples the additional element of *help*.

If we look carefully, we will find that this concept of divine help with respect to obedience to Jesus' teaching is the underlying message of this next section of the Sermon on the Mount.

“Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you. For any who asks receives, the seeking one finds, and to the knocking one it will be opened. Or what man among you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a serpent, will he? If you, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in the heavens give good to those who ask him.”

Matthew 7:7-11

As we look into this passage we notice right away three commands in the first sentence. Jesus commands his disciples to “ask,” to “seek,” and finally to “knock.” Let’s look at each of these commands in order.

Ask...

As we look at Jesus' command to ask, we will do well to also look at the parallel passage in Luke's gospel. In Luke, this command is given within the immediate context of instruction regarding persistence in prayer. Jesus had given the model prayer to his disciples (Luke 11:1-4), then he gave a short parable about persistence (Luke 11:5-8) followed by instructions almost identical to those given here in Matthew regarding asking, seeking and knocking

(Luke 11:9-13). Clearly, based on the context around the teaching in Luke, Jesus is making a point about persistence in prayer.

The context into which Matthew's gospel places the teaching, though, brings out a different point. It is important to note that, in this passage in Matthew, Jesus admonishes his disciples to "ask," but he does not specify right away what exactly he is telling his disciple's to ask for. Now Luke placed the teaching within the context of general instruction regarding persistence in prayer, so there is no need to inquire what is be asked for. In the passage in Luke, Jesus seems to be saying, "Whenever you pray, be persistent." In Matthew, however, there are twenty-one verses separating this passage and Jesus' previous instruction regarding prayer. So this passage in Matthew does not have the immediate context of prayer that is found in Luke. How then are we to understand the context in which the teaching is found in Matthew's gospel? What is Jesus talking about? What is he telling his disciples to ask for?

We can get a clue as to the answers to these questions when we notice the word "therefore" at the beginning of Matthew 7:12. The context of Luke's account seems only to indicate that Jesus is giving instruction regarding persistence in prayer. In Matthew's account, however, this teaching is given as the Sermon on the Mount is drawing to a close, and is immediately followed by a summary word of Jesus' righteous teaching (Matthew 7:12). The word "therefore" at the beginning of this summary word tells us that Jesus' admonitions to ask, seek, and knock logically lead to the summary word that immediately follows.

It is as if Jesus is finishing giving all of this profound and even impossible (naturally speaking) instruction, and then assumes that his disciples will ask: "But how? How are we supposed to live and act with this complete disregard for our own welfare? As you say yourself, we are *evil* men! (Matthew 7:11) Where are we supposed to find the faith to trust God alone for both the provision of our daily necessities and even for our physical protection? How can we do this?"

Jesus' answer is simple and profound: Ask!

Jesus tells his disciples to ask for the empowerment to do these things, then assures them that God will not withhold good things from those who ask him. And if God will not withhold the empowering Holy Spirit from his children, you can *therefore* be able to treat others, not according to how they treat you, nor according to how you believe that they deserve to be treated, but in *everything* you can treat them with the perfect love and grace with which you yourself naturally desire to be treated by others (Matthew 7:12).

But this level of righteousness *requires* the supernatural empowerment of God the Holy Spirit. Look back for a moment at the parallel account in Luke 11:9-13. As we saw, that passage is almost identical to this one in Matthew, but one of the subtle differences is found in verse thirteen. Where Matthew describes Jesus as promising that God will not withhold “good”² from those who ask him, Luke quotes Jesus’ promise as being more specifically that God will not withhold “the Holy Spirit” from those who ask. Studying Jesus’ words carefully, we find that what he is admonishing his disciples to ask for is the spiritual empowerment to do the things that he is teaching them. And this, Jesus says, is something that God is pleased to give to them.

Seek...

Having touched on what Jesus is telling his disciples to ask for, we next need to look into what Jesus means when he tells his disciples to “seek.”

This is the second time in the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus gave the command to seek. We have seen that in commanding his disciples to “ask,” he was referring to their asking for the power of the Holy Spirit that gives them the ability to obey Jesus’ words. The first command to “seek” in the sermon was similar to this. In Matthew 6:33 Jesus commanded his disciples, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.”

Watchman Nee points out the progressive nature of these three commands. He says, “‘To ask’ is an asking generally, but to ‘seek’ is a seeking specifically, and to ‘knock’ is a knocking closely. Hence each action is a step further on than the previous one.”³

It is like when Onesiphorus came to Rome in order to find and encourage Paul (1 Timothy 1:16, 17). Not knowing where Paul was being held, no doubt the first thing that Onesiphorus had to do was to *ask*. Remember that Paul was a prisoner at the time, so it could have been a dicey thing for Onesiphorus to be asking around concerning Paul’s whereabouts. It is no wonder that Paul is grateful for Onesiphorus’ lack of shame concerning his chains (1 Timothy 1:16). But once Onesiphorus gathered information about Paul’s whereabouts, the next step was to *seek*. Onesiphorus may have never been to Rome, so getting an address or hearing about a popular landmark would have only started him on the right path. Paul told Timothy that Onesiphorus had to search earnestly in order to find him (1 Timothy 1:17).

Looking back at Jesus’ command, once his disciples have asked for ability, Jesus says that it (or better “*he*” referring to the Holy Spirit) will certainly be given. From that point, then, the disciple has the responsibility to *seek*. By the simple asking, believers are spiritually empowered by the Holy Spirit to live out the righteousness that Jesus calls for. However, simply having the ability is not enough. Believers must “walk by the Spirit” that they have been given (Galatians 5:16). This is what Jesus means when he tells the disciples to *seek* God’s righteousness in Matthew 6:33. A willful, daily choosing of God’s will over the disciple’s own will, combined with a child-like dependence on the Holy Spirit’s enablement is required for this righteousness to be lived out. If you have asked for this ability, you now must seek to have the day-by-day, even moment-by-moment, living according to this ability that you have been given.

We should notice, however, that God’s righteousness is not the only thing after which Jesus commanded his disciples to seek. Jesus said, “Seek first *the kingdom of God* and his righteousness.” Jesus

had been instructing his disciples about the character of those who will inherit the coming kingdom, and has been continually admonishing them to “seek” that kingdom. Jesus has made clear that none can find that kingdom who do not possess the righteousness of the Lord; thus a seeking of the kingdom is a seeking of God’s righteousness. Having encouraged his disciples to “ask” for the Holy Spirit who can empower them to live this righteousness, he then admonishes to “seek” the experiential outworking of this righteousness that will lead to the reward of entrance into the coming kingdom.

This naturally leads to the final admonition in this progression, which is to “knock.”

Knock...

Going back to the example of Onesiphorus, after having asked for and having sought after Paul, when he finally arrived at the door where Paul was staying, Onesiphorus only had one thing left to do. He had to knock at the door. Had Paul been a stranger to him, no doubt Onesiphorus would have had some reservations about knocking. Anyone who has had to knock on the door of a stranger’s house will confirm that there is always a bit of nervousness upon first bringing one’s knuckle to the wood. The only way for a person to knock on a door with complete confidence is if he is certain that he knows and is known by the person who will be answering.

Immediately after this section regarding asking, seeking, and knocking, Jesus admonishes his disciples to “enter by the narrow gate.” The parallel passage to this one is in Luke 13:24. There Jesus similarly says to “strive to enter by the narrow door.” He follows both of those admonitions with a warning that there will be some, either at “the gate” of Matthew 7 or “the door” of Luke 13, to whom Jesus will deny entrance. The reason Jesus gives for this denial is the fact that he does not know the person who is requesting entrance. As the gate-keeper in Matthew 7:23 Jesus declares, “I never knew you,”

and as the master of the house in Luke 13:25 he says, “I do not know where you come from.”

The disciples, on the other hand, if they have been diligent to ask for the Holy Spirit’s enablement and to seek the righteousness of God, are encouraged that, if they knock, to them the door will be opened. Like Onesiphorus when he finally found where Paul was residing, the disciples are told that the One in charge of the door delights to open to them. They not only are *known* by the master of the house, but they have been personally *invited* by him. Thus they are encouraged, “Knock, and it will be opened to you.”

So, if you will notice, I am taking Jesus command to “knock” as specifically referring to knocking on the door of the coming kingdom. As we have just seen, just a few verses after the command to knock Jesus will tell his disciples to “enter by the narrow gate” (Matthew 7:13), a command which has its parallel command in Luke’s gospel when Jesus refers to the “narrow door” (Luke 13:23-30). In the Luke passage Jesus interprets the “narrow door” through which he is admonishing his disciples to enter as representing entrance in the coming messianic “kingdom of God” (Luke 13:28). This lines up exactly with what Jesus had previously instructed his disciples to “seek” (Matthew 6:33; 7:7).

Also, as we have seen, immediately following his command to “enter by the narrow gate” Jesus will warn his disciples about false prophets to whom entrance into the future “kingdom of the heavens” will be denied (Matthew 7:21). Entrance into the kingdom was Jesus’ primary focus, and so it is fair to infer that the “narrow gate” of Matthew 7:13, just like the “narrow door” of Luke 13:24, stands for entrance into the coming kingdom.

The entire Sermon on the Mount has been an instruction to the disciples about how they may be granted entrance into the coming kingdom. In this verse Jesus is encouraging his disciples that, if they will simply ask for the Holy Spirit and his power, and then are diligent to seek to live the kind of righteousness that Jesus is talking

about, then when they knock at the gate of the coming kingdom, the door will surely be opened to them.

Though Jesus had given much warning about the strictness of the righteousness he demanded and the seriousness of the consequences for the disciples' disobedience, he here gives a refreshing word of encouragement. He said something similar in Luke 12:32. After giving the same instruction that he earlier gave in the Sermon on the Mount regarding cessation from worry and the seeking of the kingdom (Luke 12:22-31), Jesus tells his disciples, "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Though entrance into the kingdom, unlike initial salvation, must be *earned*, do not fret, disciple of Jesus. God, the almighty, is on your side. He is working with you and for you. If your will is truly turned to him, he assures us that you will succeed! "Knock, and it will be opened to you..."

Therefore...

"In everything, therefore, whatever you wish for men to do to you, you do likewise, also to them..."

Matthew 7:12a

The word "therefore" (Greek: "οὖν") in this verse must not be overlooked.

In Luke's gospel this particular command, often called "the Golden Rule," is found in what seems to be the more logical place: in connection with Jesus' teaching concerning dealing with enemies (Luke 6:27-36). The natural tendency for men is to justify their own dealings with others by noticing how others treat them. Many moral teachers throughout history have noticed, similar to what Jesus says, that this kind of attitude will lead to nothing but escalating conflict

and human suffering. It is far better to resist this natural urge and to treat people with mercy, the way one would like himself to be treated.

None of these other moral teachers, however, have ever taught the level of righteousness that Jesus did, much less have any been able to perfectly live in accordance with this teaching. While this so-called “Golden Rule” has been echoed in various forms by many moral teachers throughout history, Jesus’ placing it in conjunction with his commands to love enemies and to turn the other cheek puts his teaching into a class by itself.⁴

In this section in Matthew’s gospel, however, Jesus places the command in a more unexpected place near the sermon’s conclusion. The placement in Luke’s gospel emphasizes the level of mercy that this teaching of Jesus demands. While men tend to treat others as they feel those others deserve, or in accordance with how those others have treated them, Jesus says that, regardless of the situation, his disciples are to treat others with the same level of mercy that they would want for themselves. In Matthew’s gospel, however, the location of the Golden rule provides it with a different emphasis. Here in the Sermon on the Mount, the point Jesus emphasizes is *the means* by which this level of mercy can actually be achieved.

Jesus is beginning the wrapping up of his sermon by informing his disciples *how*, exactly, they can expect to perform the level of righteousness that he is demanding. He tells them that they must “ask” for the Holy Spirit’s power, “seek” the righteousness and kingdom of God, and “knock” on the narrow gate of entrance into that kingdom. He concludes that three-fold admonition by saying that *therefore* they will be able to treat others with the level of mercy with which they would like to be treated.

Men are naturally very fickle creatures when it comes to their dealings with each other. In one moment a man may love his friend so much that he believes the friend can do no wrong. However, on the next day some minor offense might now be causing him to despise and distrust that same friend. When men treat each other based only on the flimsy whims of what their own senses of justice

believe that the others deserve, tremendous chaos and suffering inevitably result.

However, there is one person that each man, regardless of who he is, always treats with the greatest sympathy and mercy. No matter the situation, he always takes this person's side and desires the best outcome for him. This person that each man loves with an almost infinite mercy and grace is *himself*. How true are the words of the apostle Paul when he says in Ephesians 6:29, "No one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it."

While we cannot really comprehend the infinite love and grace of God, we *are* able to understand our own *almost*-infinite concern for ourselves. Jesus has already commanded his disciples to mirror the perfect love of God (Matthew 5:44-48). Here he gives them the more down-to-earth, yet seemingly no less strict command to treat others, always, how they would want themselves to be treated.

As is all of the Jesus' teaching, this is a command that absolutely requires the enabling power of God the Holy Spirit. This is why Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, states that obedience to this command is *the result* of obedience to his prior commands to ask, seek, and knock. That crucial word "therefore" at the beginning of the verse helps us to see that while Jesus' teaching is in fact just as strict as its face-value appears to be, it is expected to be obeyed only as a result of the disciples' reception of God's gracious empowerment. Jesus demands nothing from us that he does not also give to us. Praise God!

"...For this is the Law and the Prophets."

Matthew 7:12b

We started this section by looking at the proper understanding of the Mosaic Law. The Law was complete and without error, serving perfectly the purpose for which it was given.

However, when looking for a means of bringing about righteousness in men, the Law is exposed as ineffectual. The

weakness of the Law was not in its content, but in the natural disposition of its hearers. Because the Law was given by God, the apostle Paul was able to say, “The Law is spiritual,” but the next phrase brings out the problem: “But I am fleshly, sold under sin!” (Romans 8:14) The Law did nothing to change this basic characteristic of those who were under it. Thus, its commands, rather than producing righteousness, produced more and more sin (Romans 7:7-9).

Jesus, on the other hand, *does* deal with this natural disposition of man. Romans chapters 6 and 7 go into great detail about the spiritual work that Jesus accomplished by his death and resurrection. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus’ disciples are able to be delivered from the power of sin which rendered them incapable of responding appropriately to many of the righteous commands of the Law. Therefore, while Moses could only give the command to be obeyed, Jesus is able to say, “Ask and the power to obey will be given to you!”

Paul makes this point in Romans 8:3 when he says, “God has done what the Law, weakened by the flesh, could not do, by sending his own Son...” But then in the next verse he goes on to make a surprising statement when he says that God did this “in order that the righteous requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the spirit” (Romans 8:4). Just like Jesus did in Matthew 5:17, Paul wants to preclude the assumption that the righteousness of Christ is something antagonistic toward the commands of the Law. Paul had spent a great deal of time explaining the important advantage that Jesus has over the Law (Romans 1-7). Similarly Jesus spent a great deal of time earlier in the Sermon on the Mount contrasting what was written in the Law (“it was said...” – Matthew 5:21,27,31,33,38,43) with what he himself was then teaching his disciples (“but I say to you...” – Matthew 5:22,28,32,34,39,44). But both Jesus and Paul strove to make sure that all understood that the God they were serving was One and the same as the God who gave the Law, and thus the righteousness that

they were teaching was in agreement with the righteousness taught in the Law; the differences only being the result of the different contextual situations into which they were given.

In 2 Timothy 3:16 Paul taught his closest fellow-worker that *all* scripture is useful for training in righteousness. Just because the situation is different now that the Christ has come, does not mean that the Law is discarded as useless. In fact, it is we who walk by the Spirit of God, now made available through Christ, who are able to actually fulfil the righteous demands of the Law. This was Paul's point in Romans 8:4, and this is Jesus' point here in Matthew 7:12. When asked what is the greatest commandment in the Law, Jesus said number one is "love the Lord your God..." and number two is "love your neighbor *as yourself*," and on these two hang all the rest (Matthew 22:35-40). Similarly, here he says, "By asking for and walking by the Spirit's power, you are able to treat others with the same mercy and grace that you desire for yourself. And in so doing, you will fulfill even all the righteousness that was demanded in the Law and Prophets."

¹ For a more detailed explanation of this concept see chapter 3: **Jesus Teaching and the Law**, specifically the sections concerning divorce, oaths, and dealing with enemies.

² "Good" in this passage is another example of the substantival adjective. Many translations will insert the word "things" to make the English sound more natural. I take the word "good" not simply to mean "good things" generally, but more specifically to mean that which is good for the asker (understanding that the word is plural in the Greek). He is saying that if you ask for the strength to obey, this is something "good" and God will not withhold it.

³ (Nee, *The King and the Kingdom of Heaven*, 1978, p. 71)

⁴ For an explanation of the superiority of Jesus' teaching over other moral or religious teachers and their uses of the "Golden Rule" see Robert Govett's commentary on the passage: (Govett, *Sermon on the Mount*, 1984, pp. 200, 201)

9

CONCLUSION:

THE DISCIPLES' RESPONSE TO THE TEACHING

MATTHEW 7:13-27

The verses of Matthew 7:7-12 provided a final word for all of the teaching of righteousness that is found in the sermon. Jesus concluded the teaching portion of the Sermon on the Mount with his admonition to “ask, seek, and knock,” an admonition which led into the encouraging word that “therefore” the disciples can and ought to treat others with the level of love and mercy that they want for themselves.

We should see the two uses of the phrase “the Law and the Prophets,” those in Matthew 5:17 and there in Matthew 7:12, as “bookends” demonstrating where Jesus’ moral teaching begins and ends. All that was before this phrase in Matthew 5:17 was not so much *teaching*, as it was an *introduction* to the teaching to come. Likewise, all that follows that phrase in Matthew 7:12 can be seen as a *conclusion* to the teaching just given. Jesus’ instruction in righteousness started with comparing and contrasting his own teaching with what was written in the Law. His instruction concluded with the statement indicating that obedience to Jesus would lead also to fulfilling the entirety of the moral requirements of the Law as well.

The remainder of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:13-27), then, is a *concluding word*. In his introduction, Jesus had spoken of the kingdom blessings for his disciples (see chapter 2: **Introduction**).

Here in the conclusion, Jesus returns to the theme of the reward and consequence for his disciples, specifically their reward as it relates to their response to his teaching. Similar to the introduction, the conclusion will have much to do with his disciples and their relationship with the kingdom.

This concluding section of the Sermon on the Mount is divided into three sections. First is the command regarding the narrow gate (Matthew 7:13,14), second is a warning about false prophets (Matthew 7:15-23), and third is the famous illustration of the two builders (Matthew 7:24-27).

The Narrow Gate

“Enter through the narrow gate...”

Matthew 7:13a

We need to notice one fact right away as we look into Jesus’ command to “enter through the narrow gate.” As with the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, what Jesus says here is directed *toward his disciples*. He is *not* here admonishing unbelievers to believe in him, but is encouraging those who already believe to press on toward a certain goal. Therefore, when Jesus tells his disciples to “enter through the narrow gate,” he is referring to a goal set before them which they, as believers, *may or may not attain*. If there was no possibility of failing to reach the goal, then Jesus’ admonition to “enter through the gate” would make no sense.

The image that Jesus is conveying is that of a gated entrance into a walled city. If a gate is wide, as would be the main entrance into a large city, naturally the road leading up to the gate would also be wide and would likely be very easy to travel. However, if the gate is narrow, as would be a more exclusive entrance, then the pathway leading up to it would be less-traveled, and thus more narrow and difficult. So when Jesus tells his disciples to enter by the *narrow*

gate, they would naturally consider the gate to be the end goal of the difficult journey along the difficult road.

Most commentators that I have found suppose that “the gate” in this passage pictures initial conversion (what we have referred to elsewhere in this work as the “new birth”). Now, if one agrees with my view of seeing the gate as being the end to which the “constricted way” is leading, then seeing the narrow gate spoken of in this passage as standing for initial salvation would give a false and dangerous impression of the nature of the new birth. Seeing the gate as initial salvation would imply that a great deal of human effort (pictured by trekking up the difficult way) would be required in order to obtain that salvation. This, of course, is not true regarding initial salvation. The new birth is accomplished by simple faith, apart from works. So seeing the gate as regeneration, and its being the destination at the end of a constricted way, gives a false impression of this salvation.

However, many commentators do not see the imagery of the entrance into a city, and thus, because “the gate” is mentioned first in the text, they see it as being passed through *before* “the way” is traveled. Thus, many holding this view see the gate as referring to initial salvation, which then leads to a difficult life (signified by “the way”).¹ Many of these commentators, rather than seeing the gate being pointed out initially as the goal, instead see a separate destination to which “the way” leads, which they often identify as “heaven” and its accompanying final deliverance from hell. If we look carefully, we will find that these commentators are just as guilty as those of our earlier example of inferring from the teaching a message of salvation by works. Even if the walking through the gate pictures simple faith, if final salvation is only achieved by successfully traversing a difficult life, then works are still a requirement for final salvation.²

Even *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, with its heavy emphasis on the freeness of God’s offer of salvation, falls into this trap. Hal Haller, the writer of the Matthew section of the commentary, sees the entrance by “the gate” as being equated with

the initial reception of eternal life (which he rightly emphasizes as being by belief in Jesus). He then is forced into seeing another separate destination at the end of the difficult “way.” This tacitly implies that final salvation (what is thought to be meant by the “life” to which the difficult way leads) can only be arrived at following a life of obedient working.³ There is no doubt that the writers of the commentary would deny this doctrine, but understanding “the way” as the Christian life following the reception of eternal life (signified by the gate) undoubtedly implies that heaven, illustrated by the separate destination at the end of “the way,” is not guaranteed to the one who simply believes (enters “the gate”), but can only be arrived at as a result of living the correct life (following “the way”). Thus we see the importance of properly seeing the gate as *the end* to which the constricted way is leading.

But if not initial regeneration, nor final salvation, what then does the gate represent? To answer this question we would do well to look again at the parallel passage in Luke 13:22-29.

In the passage in Luke, Jesus admonishes his disciples to “strive to enter through the narrow door.”⁴ Jesus says this in response to the question, “Are (only) a few *being saved*?” This has led many to the false conclusion that in this passage entrance by the narrow door pictures initial salvation.

Now, we must concede that indeed Jesus’ admonition to “enter by the narrow door” was given in response to the question about “salvation.” This does not mean, however, that Jesus was necessarily talking about what we Christians commonly mean when we use the words “saved” or “salvation.” When we hear either of these words, we tend to immediately jump to either the concept of initial belief (getting “saved”) or to the final deliverance from hell. However, as in each case where the word “save” or “salvation” (Greek: “σῶζω” or “σωτηρία”) is used, the question must be asked, “Saved from what?”

We saw back in chapter 1 of this work that there are words that have multiple meanings in the scriptures and can cause confusion if we do not handle them carefully. The word “saved” is one such

word. For instance, if we assumed that the word “saved” (Greek: “σῳζω”) in John 11:12 means delivered from eternal judgment, then we would wrongly conclude that the disciples thought Lazarus would have been eternally saved by catching up on his sleep! Likewise, if we assume that the word “salvation” (Greek: “σωτηρία”) in Acts 27:34 means our common understanding of being born again, then we would assume that Paul told his fellow sailors that their salvation is procured by eating food! In those two instances, the words commonly understood to be a reference to eternal salvation actually pictured “salvation” from sickness, on the one hand, and from physical death from shipwreck, on the other.

I use these silly sounding examples simply to illustrate the point that the words “saved” and “salvation,” when used in the scriptures, must be interpreted based on their *context* and they must not simply be assumed to mean what Christians often mean when they use them. So what does Jesus understand the word “saved” to mean in Luke 13:23? Well, thankfully for us, Jesus explains his answer further in the verses that follow.

Jesus was asked if there would only be a few who would be “saved,” and his response was that his hearers ought to “strive to enter through the narrow door.” He then went on to describe the position of his fellow Jews regarding the coming messianic kingdom. He said that people from all over the world would be reclining at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in “the kingdom of God” while those of his own nation who had rejected him would be “cast out” (Luke 13:28,29). He then went on to lament the fact that his own people were rejecting the only hope they would have of this “salvation” from being “cast out” (Luke 13:34,35). Thus we see that, based on its context, “entrance by the narrow door” does in fact refer to being “saved,” but this salvation is not a being saved from final damnation, but rather it refers to being saved from being “cast out” of the coming millennial kingdom.

Looking back at our passage in Matthew 7:13, the most reasonable conclusion that we can draw is that the “narrow gate” of this verse,

just like the “narrow door” of Luke 13:24, represents entrance into the coming millennial kingdom. Having been speaking of the character of his kingdom people from the beginning of the sermon (Matthew 5:3,10,18-20), having been referring continually to God’s *reward* for faithful disciples (Matthew 5:12; 6:4,6,18), and being about to warn his disciples about some who will not inherit the kingdom (Matthew 7:21-23), Jesus here gives a direct admonition to do what is required to enter the kingdom. He tells his disciples, if you have *asked* for the Holy Spirit’s enabling power, if you have *sought* after God’s kingdom and righteousness, and if you have *knocked* at the narrow gate, all that is left is for you to *enter* by that gate into his kingdom!

The Two Ways

“...For the gate is wide and the way is spacious which leads to destruction,⁵ and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is constricted that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”

Matthew 7:13b-14

Jesus began this section by referring to the narrow gate, but then quickly explains that there are two “ways” (or “roads” or “paths”) available to his disciples. He warns that only one of these paths leads to the desired gate. As we have just seen, the narrow gate that the correct path leads to represents entrance into the millennial kingdom.

What, then, is being pictured by these two “ways” in this passage? Tom Finley, in his booklet *Two Ways and Two Gates*, to which I owe a great debt of gratitude for help in interpreting this passage, sees “the way” as picturing “the life we live now in preparation for the coming Judgment Seat of Christ.”⁶ Because the goal of the narrow gate pictures entrance into the coming kingdom, it can naturally be inferred that the way leading to the goal pictures the believer’s life

leading up to the moment when he will be either granted or denied entrance into the kingdom. While I acknowledge this as being true, I do not think it gives the full picture of what Jesus is saying.

The life that a disciple lives leading up to his appearance before the Judgment Seat of Christ is certainly what he will be judged by as Christ determines his reward or loss with respect to the kingdom. However, I see “the way” in this passage as being even more specific. Jesus is not *only* saying that one road (obedience) leads to life (kingdom reward), while the other (disobedience) leads to destruction (loss of kingdom). He *is* saying that, but given where this warning is placed within the Sermon on the Mount, I see the two options placed before the disciples as more specifically relating to the disciples’ *response to Jesus’ teaching*.

Upon hearing Jesus’ words, a conscious choice must be made by each disciple. Either the disciple will hear Jesus’ words, take them exactly as they are, and then act upon them, or else he will hear Jesus’ words, consider what the ramifications would be of taking them literally, and then search for a different way of understanding them.

To see an example of what I feel that Jesus means by “the spacious way,” I would encourage you to simply evaluate the bulk of Christian commentaries regarding Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:17-48. When Jesus is contrasting his own sayings with the Law, by far the majority of commentaries take Jesus to be saying no more than what was said to Israel by Moses. They soften Jesus’ words. They take the broad way. Most will say that, while Jesus was correcting the scribes who may have been softening the Law, Jesus’ doctrine itself goes nowhere beyond what Moses truly meant. Whether referring to Jesus’ forbidding of legal defense in court (Matthew 5:40), his forbidding of oaths (Matthew 5:34), his prohibition against divorce (Matthew 5:32), his forbidding of laying up earthly treasure (Matthew 6:19), or his prohibition of sitting in the seat of judgment (Matthew 7:1), it is lamentable that Christian scholarship has produced endless volumes explaining why their Lord did not really mean what he said.

Govett's commentary is one of the precious few who take the correct view of Jesus' teaching as being in *contrast* to the Mosaic Law. Listen as Govett explains what is meant by "the broad way," or the softened version of Jesus' teaching:

"It but little interferes with the life of sober persons of regular lives. The way is broad. It will allow them to follow the world in its various delights, as of old it permitted the Jew to do. It permits the disciple to toil after the wealth and honours of the world. It defends his rights and property with the strong arm of the law. It enables him to make 'the best of this world,' if it does not of the age to come.

"He who treads it will be far from finding himself alone. He will find no difficulty in discovering the gate.⁷ Over each parochial communion-table in the land he will see the doctrine stated. He will find multitudes from age to age taking this as their standard, and promising to obey it as their way to eternal life. 'Many go in thereat.' Protestants and Romanists esteem it to be discipleship; and live, some more, some less, in accordance therewith."⁸

The "spacious way" is the easier path to walk. It pictures the assumption that disciples of Jesus, while no doubt instructed to be righteous people, have no more placed upon them than did the people of Israel. The strongest of Jesus' words, especially those against making legal defense for oneself and against storing up earthly treasure, become all but ignored. Jesus predicted that, sadly, this would be the majority view among those who would seek to be his disciples.

Now, many take the "spacious way" to refer to the fact that there will always be more unbelievers in the world than believers. According to this view, rejection of Christ himself (the spacious way), will be more common than belief in him (the constricted way). While it is true that the majority of hearers of the gospel reject Christ, taking this as Jesus' meaning here does not make as much sense as a warning to disciples who *already believe*. Remember that the disciples are the target audience of the teaching, so his concluding warning must be something appropriate to them.

Jesus does elsewhere warn his disciples about the reaction of the world to himself. In John 15:18-25 he warns that the disciples themselves should expect this same rejection that Jesus received. Here, however, Jesus is warning about the reaction of his own disciples to the things that he is now teaching. He says that there are two ways to take what he is saying in the Sermon on the Mount. There is the spacious way, which is easier, softer, and will be by far the more popular. Then there is the constricted way, which is the more difficult and will be far less popular. Each disciple must choose which path to take. As for you, reader, as you decide, you will also need to remember what Jesus warns about the destinations of the two roads.

The Two Destinations

Many genuine and sincere Christians take the two destinations referred to in this verse as picturing heaven and hell.⁹ The fact that the world contains more rejecters of Christ than accepters of him seems to be sufficient proof that, if you believe in Jesus, then you are walking the narrow road and are destined to arrive at the “life” to which it leads.

The problem with this view is that it makes the warning serve very little purpose to the disciples to whom it was given. Unless you take final salvation from hell to require something beyond simple faith, then the disciples (except Judas of course) should already be assured of their final destiny. Perhaps if Jesus was directly addressing the crowds this understanding would make more sense, but considering (what we have seen again and again throughout the sermon) that Jesus was specifically addressing his disciples, there is no need for a warning for them to get on the road *to heaven*. They were already on that road.

If, however, in conjunction with the overall theme of the sermon, the destination at the end of the way pictures the *reward of the kingdom*, then it is entirely appropriate that Jesus would be warning his disciples in this way.

With the disciples' eternal destiny with God being eternally secure by their faith in him, Jesus, in this sermon, has been laying before them the criteria for entrance into the coming millennial kingdom. He has stated that the kingdom will belong to the poor in spirit. He has explained that those set to inherit the kingdom will be persecuted today. He has warned that a righteousness greater than the scribes and Pharisees is required for entrance into this kingdom. He has continually given promises of the future reward from God which awaits those who obey him. He has given very sober warnings about God's severe, next-age discipline that he will not withhold from those who hate and slander their brothers. It only makes sense that Jesus would be concluding his message with an admonition to enter into "the way" which leads finally to the "gate" of entrance into this coming kingdom.

As we have seen already, the "gate" of this passage, taking it as parallel with the "door" of Luke 13:24, pictures entrance into the future kingdom. Jesus had just told his disciples to "seek" the kingdom and "knock" at its gate (Matthew 7:7), and shortly he will warn about some who will be denied entrance (Matthew 7:21). Here Jesus is telling the disciples that it is the *minority view* of the nature of his teaching, the more constricted and difficult view, which is the one that will ultimately lead to the kingdom reward that he has been discussing.

So the gate, the destination at the end of the way, refers to being granted entrance into the future kingdom. In this verse Jesus refers to this destination as "life." This coincides exactly with what we have previously seen regarding Jesus' conversation with the rich, young ruler.¹⁰ In that passage, along with many others, "life" or "eternal life" refers to a future reward. It is something that, in a future day, some will be allowed to "enter" into (Matthew 19:17). The time when this reward will be received is specifically mentioned to be "in the age to come" (Mark 10:30; Luke 18:30).

As we have seen, this concept should not be confused with the notion of the *present gift* of eternal life referred to elsewhere. When

eternal life is referred to as something to be received *immediately*, it always means the gift of spiritual new birth, which is received simply by faith (John 6:47, 1 John 5:11). But, when eternal life is referred to as something to be entered into *in the future*, it always means the reward of the experience of the glories of the kingdom age (Matthew 19:17,23,28).

If the “life” of future kingdom reward is what is pictured by the narrow gate at the end of the constricted way, what then is meant by the wide gate at the end of the spacious way? The word that Jesus uses to describe the destination represented by the wide gate is the word “destruction.” Of course this “destruction” must be understood in opposition to the “life” at the end of the constricted road. If “life” means inheritance of the coming kingdom, then destruction must describe loss of that inheritance.

A full treatise on the various forms of God’s disciplinary judgment on his own people would be too much for this present work, but there have been a few warnings already mentioned in the sermon that we can look at briefly.

Firstly, remember our discussion about Matthew 5:19. Jesus warns that “whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of the heavens.” A disciple’s hope of receiving the reward of co-reigning with Jesus is sacrificed when the disciple lives so as to *soften* Jesus words for himself or for others. With each “relaxing” of Jesus’ word, the disciple’s position in the coming kingdom is down-graded.¹¹ So first we have the possibility of a disciple who, though he will still receive the reward of entrance into the coming kingdom, will see his position within the kingdom down-graded due to his “relaxing” one or more of Jesus’ commandments.

Next, if you remember Jesus’ warning in Matthew 5:20, an even greater “destruction” is possible. Jesus warns that unless the righteousness of a disciple of his surpasses the level of that of the scribes and Pharisees, he “will never enter the kingdom of the heavens.”

Many who wrongly equate “entrance into the kingdom” with new birth, justification, or final salvation, attempt to make the “righteousness” spoken of here into a “positional righteousness” rather than a subjective, experiential righteousness. Knowing that new birth is not the result of righteous deeds, they cannot take Jesus to be saying what, based on the context, it is clear that he actually is saying. None argue that the two statements preceding this one refer to anything other than subjective, experiential righteousness. Jesus says that a disciple’s position within the kingdom varies in accordance with the disciple’s treatment of “these commands.”¹² It is an untenable exegetical stretch to assume that Jesus is speaking about experiential righteousness in the first two statements regarding position within the kingdom and then jumps to positional righteousness, something he had not even discussed yet within the sermon, in the third statement regarding simple entrance into the kingdom. Thus, the second “destruction” that could await the disciple, beyond the simple down-grade of his status within the kingdom, is *complete loss* of the millennial kingdom itself. If his righteousness never develops beyond the self-glorying legalism of the scribes and Pharisees, the disciple, though genuinely born again, will nevertheless be refused entrance into the kingdom of a thousand years.¹³

Lastly, we saw in Matthew 5:22 that Jesus warned about the possibility of a disciple of his being “liable to the Gehenna of fire.” Without restating the entire argument presented earlier in this work, it will suffice to say that Jesus warns that, beyond simply the loss of reward within the kingdom, beyond even the loss of the kingdom itself, his disciples, for the most heinous acts of disobedience (especially ones regarding abuse of other believers), can experience a positive, disciplinary chastisement from the Lord himself. Such a believer is “liable to the Gehenna of fire.”¹⁴ This is the most severe possible manifestation of the “destruction” that Jesus warns about here in Matthew 7:13.

Now, while the “destruction” that Jesus speaks of certainly will be manifested in the coming age, there is also another layer to the meaning that we will do well to notice.

The scriptures make clear that the receiving of the reward of rulership with Christ in the next age requires the disciples of Jesus to remain faithful to him until the end of their life on earth. In multiple places in the New Testament the life of the believer is compared to a runner in a race, specifically a race in which he is running in order to win a prize (see 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; 2 Timothy 4:7,8; Hebrews 12:1). While a runner in this race may stumble at times, it is made clear that he must get back up and finish if he would have any hope of receiving the prize. Even the apostle Paul himself, at times, expressed that it was possible that he himself could falter and thus not inherit the prize set before him (1 Corinthians 9:27; Philippians 3:12-14).

Similarly, in the Christian life there are certainly opportunities for repentance, confession of sin, and restoration unto fellowship with God, all of which equate to the runner falling, yet getting back up and into the race. However, there is also the possibility that, continuing with the race metaphor, a runner could either voluntarily quit, taking himself out of the race, or be disqualified. This would picture a believer either ceasing to follow the Lord as an obedient disciple, or else denying his faith under pressure from those who would oppose him. The apostle Paul saw this as even potentially happening to himself! He said, “I beat my body and enslave it, lest after proclaiming to others, I myself might be disqualified” (1 Corinthians 9:27). Paul elaborates more, using this same “race” imagery, when in 2 Timothy 2:5 he tells Timothy, “If one competes, he is not crowned unless he competes lawfully.” He then shortly goes on to say, “If we endure, we will also co-reign; if we deny him, he also will deny us.”

In making this point he is stating the same thing that Jesus says in Matthew 10:32,33: “Therefore, everyone who confesses me before men, I will also confess him before my Father who is in the heavens. But whoever denies me before men, I also will deny him before my

Father who is in the heavens.” A denial of Jesus during the course of this life means a loss of a disciple’s potential inheritance in the age to come.

Thus, since the disciple’s confession of faith during this life is inexorably linked with his potential reward in the kingdom age, we can reasonably infer that the potential “destruction” in this passage can also refer to the loss of a disciple’s *witness for Christ* as well.

A disciple’s adherence to the teachings of Jesus will be weighed by Jesus himself when the disciple appears before the Judgment Seat. One certain way for a disciple to know that he will *not* receive his reward is if he abandons his testimony of faith in this life. If we deny him, he will deny us.

I bring this fact up because there are really two possible outcomes for a disciple who chooses the “spacious way” of softening Jesus’ words, both of which are described by the “destruction” to which this road leads. If, during the time of a disciple’s life, the surrounding world is more amiable with Christianity, the spacious road will be walked with little awareness of the fact that disapproval awaits the disciple at the future Judgment Seat of Christ. However, if the attitude of the world is hostile to the Christian, it will not be long before the very profession of his faith will be challenged and his temptation will be to abandon his testimony and deny his Lord.¹⁵

A disciple making the conscious choice to walk the narrow way of strict adherence to Jesus’ teaching will prevent both of these possibilities of “destruction.” Throughout the history of the Church, Satan has used both of these tactics in order to prevent Jesus’ disciples from walking in full obedience to him. At times he has attempted to use acceptance by the world to seduce believers into adopting lower, worldly standards of righteousness. At other times he has attempted to persecute believers, driving them to abandon and deny the faith that saved them. Only by deciding in their hearts that they will, by the grace of God, obey Jesus’ words no matter the situation, can Jesus’ disciples be protected from these two Satanic stratagems. Before Satan attempts either of these tactics, the disciples

must be resolved to love and pray for both their brothers and their enemies, to refuse the civic law as a means of defending themselves or their property, to deny to themselves the accumulation of material wealth, and most importantly, to ask for the daily help of God the Holy Spirit in their obedience to Christ's commands.

If the disciple, from the beginning of his Christian life, sets these commands of Jesus as his standard of righteousness, with full knowledge of his need for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, he will have started down the narrow path toward "life" in the coming kingdom. It is the more constricted way, and it is by far the less popular way, but it is the only means of securing his protection from the "destruction" of a loss of his testimony in this age and the denial of entrance into the coming kingdom in the age to come.

Warning About False Prophets

Looking into the next verses, we will see that, without leaving the topic of the proper reaction to his teaching, Jesus will weave into his explanation a warning about certain men who would lead his disciples astray. He had just explained to his disciples that taking the "constricted way" of face-value interpretation of his teaching is what will lead, finally, to being given the reward of the kingdom. Now in these next verses he will give a warning about false prophets who would lead the disciples away from this path. He does this first of all by teaching how to discern who is a false prophet. Then, we will see, Jesus is going to use these very false prophets as examples of ones who will themselves not be granted entrance into the kingdom.

Discerning False Prophets

"Beware of the false prophets: whoever comes to you in clothing of sheep, but within are rapacious wolves."

Matthew 7:15

Jesus has already spent a great deal of time in the Sermon on the Mount speaking about the opposition that his disciples will face from unbelievers who will slander and persecute them (see Matthew 5:10-12,39,44; 7:6). Even the previous command to “enter by the narrow gate” carried with it a warning that the way up to the gate would be a “constricted” one, implying, among other things, that the disciples would meet opposition from unbelievers along their journey. We will see in the coming section about the two builders (Matthew 7:24-27), that persecution from outside will be one of the main obstacles preventing the disciples from maintaining their confession of faith.

In this present verse (Matthew 7:15), however, Jesus turns from the persecution that would come from the outside and gives a direct warning about opposition that comes from *inside* the gathering of believers. He here warns about “false prophets.” Someone claiming to be a prophet is by definition someone claiming to speak on behalf of God. Men like this will be among the congregation of the disciples and will be claiming to be there for the benefit of the believers. This is what is meant by them coming “in clothing of sheep.”

The apostle Paul gave a similar warning to the one found here when he addressed the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:29,30. In that passage Paul warns that even among the elders gathered there with him, there would arise “men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them.” It seems that these evil men rising up in Ephesus not only included false prophets, but even some who were false *apostles* (see Jesus’ commendation of the Ephesian assembly in Revelation 2:2). Jesus has been warning against Satan’s attacks coming from the outside, either by persecution or seduction, but perhaps Satan’s most effective strategies for leading believers astray will be the ones that operate from the inside: imitation and deception. In his wisdom and foresight, Jesus warns his disciples about these inside attacks as well.

“By their fruits you will know them. Grapes are not gathered from thorns, nor figs from thistles,

are they? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. A good tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits."

Matthew 7:16-20

The English translation of this passage can cause a bit of confusion if not explained. There is a subtle difference between the message conveyed in this passage and the one conveyed in the parallel passage in Luke 6:43-45. The Greek in this passage uses two different words for "good," as well as two different words for "bad."¹⁶ In the passage in Luke, however, Jesus uses the same words for good (καλός) and bad (σαρρός) to describe both the trees and the fruits. This distinction is subtle but does have some significance.

The passage in Luke is within the context of Jesus addressing his disciples about their own attitudes and behavior. Jesus uses the tree and its fruit to illustrate that the content of one's heart manifests through one's words and behavior, making the very point that he makes to the Pharisees in Matthew 12:33-37. He is saying that the internal character of a person controls the external behavior, so the important point is to "make the tree (internal character) good" so that the fruit (external behavior) will follow (Matthew 12:33).

Here in Matthew 7, however, the situation is a little bit different. Here Jesus is not specifically teaching the disciples about their own hearts and behavior, but is teaching about discerning the character of *another person*. When speaking to people about their own individual heart attitude (as in Luke 6), Jesus says that they can be sure that the content of their heart will, eventually, be fully and exactly manifest in their speech and behavior. Thus, Jesus uses the same words for good and bad to describe the tree and the fruit. When speaking about the discernment of others (as here in Matthew 7), however, Jesus does not

say that things are quite so exact. He uses similar, but different words for both good and bad. As a principle, evil fruit indicates a bad tree and more desirable fruit indicates a good tree, but when looking at others, we should not be so quick to say that the fruit that we see exactly represents the internal character of the person.

The principle is similar to what Jesus said a few verses earlier in Matthew 7:3. One should think of his brother's sin (the speck in your brother's eye) as a much smaller issue than his own sin (the log in your eye), not presuming to know so much about another's character simply based on his limited observation of the other's behavior.

Why, if in Matthew 7:3-5 Jesus warns against this judgmental attitude, does he seem to imply in this present passage that his disciples should be "fruit inspectors" of others? Well, remember that Jesus is saying this in the context of warning his disciples about "false prophets." He is not saying that his disciples should be continually inspecting others' behavior to discern, by their behavior, what is within their hearts. Rather he is warning his disciples about the very real danger of those who would deceive them and lead them astray.

Jesus had just warned his disciples about the danger of indiscriminately *sharing* their spiritual treasure with those who may reject it and oppose them (Matthew 7:6). Here he is warning them about the danger of *receiving* from some who may be leading them astray. The fellowship of the Holy Spirit that Christians share with one another can be such a joy that a believer may, in his eagerness, either share that fellowship with those who would discourage him by "trampling" it (Matthew 7:6), or even worse, the believer could try to receive such fellowship from those who would attempt to manipulate him and take him away from the Lord. If Jesus' disciples wish to walk the constricted way which leads to the narrow door of the coming kingdom, they will have to be careful that they are not deceived by false prophets who would lead them down a different path.

Now, using these false prophets, Satan is able to imitate much of what genuine prophets do. When we begin to look into the verses

which follow these, we will notice some of the specifics of how these false prophets imitate what is true. For now, though, Jesus would simply have us notice one thing. When discerning a false prophet, Jesus' disciples must look for one specific trait in one who is claiming to genuinely speak for God, a trait which which false prophets cannot imitate. While false prophets may deceive people by various means, they can never replicate the level of *righteous living* that will be found in someone who is abiding in fellowship with God. This is why Jesus does not tell his disciples to judge prophets by their showy displays of power, nor even by their words, which can deceive or confuse. Rather Jesus says to discern false prophets "by their fruit," that is, by the practical righteousness that is the result of their prophetic ministry.

Let's reflect for a moment on what Jesus means by "fruit" in this passage. Just a few chapters earlier in Matthew's gospel we read of John the Baptist using this same metaphor of the tree and the fruit. Judging by John's message, we can discern that "fruit" pictures behavior which is righteous and appropriate. With the Messiah about to arrive and thus the kingdom near at hand, the message by this genuine prophet of God was, "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance!" (Matthew 3:8) The people of Israel, especially their religious leadership, were behaving in ways totally inappropriate for the heavenly kingdom of the Messiah. John went into greater detail explaining what this "fruit" would look like in Luke 3:10-14.

So Jesus says that it is by the nature of this "fruit" that the genuineness of a prophet should be tested. Jesus could mean that the prophet himself must display this kind of righteousness, or he could mean that this righteousness will be what is produced in his hearers. My view is that both the personal behavior of the prophet, as well as the outcome of his ministry in others can be considered his "fruit" by which he should be judged.

Regarding the notion that the fruit pictures the prophet's own righteousness, we can look at the apostle Paul's warning to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:2-8. The apostle warns about men who will "oppose

the truth,” just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses. If you know the story, Jannes and Jambres imitated the miraculous works done by Moses in attempts to either discredit Moses or to elevate themselves to his level (see Exodus 7). This is just what the false prophets that Jesus is warning about in this passage might do. As Jesus and Paul explain to us, we need not be deceived by these evil men, if we simply notice the character their teaching produces in their own lives.

Regarding the other notion, that the fruit pictures the righteousness produced in the prophet’s hearers, we need only look at another section in that same letter of Paul to Timothy. In 2 Timothy 4:3 Paul warns that “the time is coming when men will not endure healthy teaching, but having itching ears they will heap-up teachers according to their own lusts.” False teachers may gain an audience due to their own craftiness and deception, but often their folly would be “plain to all” (1 Timothy 3:9) if it were not for the desire of their audience to hear these kinds of falsehoods. So here we see the other “fruit” of the false prophet. If their teaching does nothing but confirm men in “their own lusts,” then just like the self-proclaimed prophets who are unrighteous in their own lives, we can know that these are not genuinely speaking on behalf of the Lord.

A good rule of thumb is to simply remember that the goal is to be walking the constricted way which leads to the narrow, kingdom door. Any prophet that is either not walking this constricted way himself, or is causing people more and more to join the larger crowd who walk the spacious way, we can be sure is one of the false prophets that Jesus is here warning about.

Before moving on to the next verses, there is one more observation that I would like to make. Notice from these verses the level of *humility* that Jesus expects from his disciples. Many might be tempted to say to themselves, “I know my Bible, so I can tell whether a prophet is real or not simply by hearing what he says! If what the person says is in accordance with the rest of revealed truth, then he’s genuine. If not, then he’s false.” But such thinking exposes a dangerous pride, because it does not realize that, no matter how smart

or well-read we might perceive ourselves to be, we will never be more clever, nor more versed in the scriptures, than are Satan and his evil spiritual forces. These evil beings may well be those who are animating a false prophet. None of us is beyond being deceived by cunning words and arguments. Jesus would have us remain humble enough to look, as he tells us to, at the *fruit* of every so-called prophet's ministry, acutely aware of our own vulnerability to being deceived by clever words designed to lead us astray.

False Prophets as an Example of Kingdom Rejection

“Not everyone who is saying to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of the heavens, rather (it will be) the one who is doing the will of my Father who is in the heavens.”

Matthew 7:21

Here we see the “weaving” that we spoke of earlier. Jesus is teaching two things at once. He is still warning about the danger of false prophets, but he is tying that teaching together with his overall sermon theme of entrance into the coming kingdom.

Jesus reiterates the point that he has made clear since the first words of the sermon. Jesus states in no uncertain terms that practical obedience to God is required for entrance into the coming kingdom. It will be the one who is “doing the will of my Father” who enters.¹⁷

“Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not, in your name, prophesy? And in your name cast out demons? And in your name do many mighty works?’”

Matthew 7:22

Remember that Jesus is teaching his disciples about how to determine if a prophet is false or true. There will be those claiming to speak for God who try to convince Jesus' disciples that they are helping to lead them down the road to the kingdom. Jesus is explaining that many of these men are not even on that road themselves.

In the scriptures, God does often accompany the words that he speaks through one of his prophets with miraculous signs. He does this in order to graciously help to validate the message that is being spoken. This was the case when God sent Moses back into Egypt to command Pharaoh to let his people go. God validated Moses as being his genuine messenger by granting powerful signs and wonders to be performed by him. But if you will remember, though their powers were limited, the magicians of Egypt were able to mimic some of Moses' early miraculous plagues, and in doing so worked to further harden Pharaoh's heart against the command of God (Exodus 7:22).

In the New Testament also we see the story of Simon the Great. Prior to his conversion, Simon had duped the people of Samaria into believing that he possessed "the power of God" by using displays of magic. His popularity was so strong that even after his conversion he lusted after the genuine power possessed by the apostles, even to the point that he tried to purchase it with money (Acts 8:9-24).

Now God will, at times, graciously limit the abilities of false prophets. We can observe Elijah's confrontation with the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18:20-40 to see an example of this. No matter how much they performed their dark religious rituals, God prevented a single spark from falling on the altar they had prepared. However, there are also times when false prophets will be permitted to receive deceiving powers from dark spiritual forces. In Revelation 13:13,14 we read about the false prophet who will use miraculous signs in order to deceive the inhabitants of the earth. Beyond this, there is also always the possibility of phony displays of power through trickery and sleight of hand. These possibilities of deception are why Jesus is here explaining to his disciples that it is not the impressive displays of power that his disciples should look at in determining the

genuineness of a prophet, but rather they must look at the fruit produced by his ministry.

Jesus explains that there will be some who stand before him at his judgment seat making protestations that they have done a variety of miraculous works in his name, the first of these works being that of prophecy. These being judged are, based on the context, the type of false prophets that Jesus is warning his disciples about here.

“And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you. Depart from me you workers of lawlessness.’”

Matthew 7:23

Note that Jesus neither affirms nor denies that these false prophets ever actually performed the miraculous works that they claimed to have performed in his name. As we noted before, there is the possibility that these types of works can be performed by using the power of evil spiritual forces, so the claims that some supernatural activities have taken place are not necessarily false. All that Jesus denies is the claim that these activities were done “lawfully,” meaning under his direction. The false prophets ask Jesus, “Did we not prophecy *in your name*?” and Jesus responds, “I never knew you!”

Now, obviously Jesus is not claiming that he was in any way ignorant of these men or of their behavior. The Greek word rendered “knew” (Greek: “γινώσκω”) often conveys a sense of intimate involvement (see John 10:14,15; 1 Corinthians 8:3), even including marital union (Matthew 1:25). Within this context we should understand Jesus as denying the claim of the false prophets, that they performed these miraculous works “in his name.” That is, Jesus is denying that these works were performed in any way under his ordering or direction. Jesus is saying that he was not involved with any of them.

Remember that Jesus has said that the criterion for entering the kingdom is doing the will of his Father. The false prophets claim to

have done this, and they point to their own miraculous works as proof. Jesus, however, declares that he does not approve of them, but rather that the works displayed were works of “lawlessness.” In saying this, Jesus makes a two-fold point. Firstly, he confirms his warning to the disciples that a display of miraculous power does not guarantee that a prophet is genuinely of God. Secondly, Jesus makes the point that furthers the overall theme of the Sermon: *doing* the will of God the Father, specifically by obeying the teachings of God the Son, made possible only by the empowerment and direction of God the Holy Spirit, is required for entrance into the coming kingdom.¹⁸

Two Builders

And now, at last, we come to the final words of the Sermon on the Mount. In the sermon’s introduction, Jesus made the amazing statement that the poor in spirit, those who are mourning, the ones who are persecuted, etc. should all be *happy*. Though the world would count them as cursed and despised, Jesus sees them as blessed. Why? Because he says that though they indeed will suffer during the course of this age, the kingdom and the glory of the age to come is and will be theirs.

That was the message with which Jesus started his sermon, and throughout the course of the sermon he established this point in clearer detail. Jesus gave strict and specific instructions on how exactly a disciple of his ought to live in this age if he would be one of those meek, merciful, or pure in heart to whom the glory of the next age belongs.

It is important to note that, looking back at the last two of the beatitudes given in the sermon’s introduction, both of these speak of external persecution of the disciples. Likewise, a few verses before the ones we are looking at here in its conclusion, Jesus had just made an important point about the “constricted way” leading up to the door of the kingdom. The path will not be easy, but in this next and final section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus explains how his disciples can finally arrive at and enter through the door of kingdom reward.

The Wise

“Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and does them will be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock.”

Matthew 7:24

In order to come to the correct interpretation of Jesus’ concluding illustration, we need to see first of all that what Jesus is talking about here is the disciples’ *response to his teaching*, specifically their response to the teaching that he has just given. While elsewhere in the scriptures the “rock” pictures Christ himself,¹⁹ Jesus makes it clear that in this present illustration, the rock pictures not Jesus himself, but rather the words that Jesus has just spoken. The teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is the rock on which the wise builder lays the foundation for his house.

What then is pictured by the house that the builder is building? A comparison is sometimes made between this illustration and one the apostle Paul makes in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15. There is no question that there are similarities between the two illustrations, but there are some important key differences as well.

As we just noted, the “rock” upon which the house is built, in Jesus’ illustration, is explained by Jesus himself to be a picture of his *teaching* in the Sermon on the Mount. However, in 1 Corinthians 3, the foundation is specifically said to picture the Lord himself (1 Corinthians 3:11). Now, in 1 Corinthians 3 Paul makes it clear that what is illustrated by the house being built is his and others’ work, as apostles, in building up the local church. Since Paul was the first to work among the Corinthians, he had the privilege of leading them to Christ. This, in the illustration, is pictured as laying the foundation of the house. Once the foundation is laid, Paul, or Apollos, or anyone else may build upon the foundation. Each builder is warned, though,

that he must “watch how he builds” (1 Corinthians 3:10), because there is a coming day when each builder’s work will be evaluated.

In Jesus’ illustration here in Matthew 7, however, the building of the house is more of an individual matter. Rather than each apostle adding to the one house, Jesus says that each disciple is building his *own* house. And rather than being warned about the specific materials with which he builds, the disciple is instead warned only about the quality of the foundation that he has laid. The most important difference between this illustration in Matthew 7, and the one in 1 Corinthians 3, though, is what kind of calamity the house is said to be about to undergo.

In 1 Corinthians 3 the calamity pictured is a house-fire. In barely more than an instant, the entire house is burned up, and everything that is made of “wood, hay, or stubble” is consumed by the flames. The builder is rewarded for whatever survives the fire, which would be those items made of “gold, silver, and precious stones.” Paul explains that the house fire pictures “the Day” of the believers’ future judgment. In a moment, as the believer is standing before the Lord, all of his work in building up the Lord’s church will be revealed. All that was wrought through the cooperative working of the believer with God the Holy Spirit (the gold, silver, and precious stones) will be richly rewarded, but whatever was done simply by means of the man’s natural ability (the wood, hay, or stubble) will be consumed and gone forever. Paul makes it clear that, no matter what, the believer himself will be delivered safely through this judgment, but potentially only as a man being rescued through a blaze (1 Corinthians 3:15).

Here in Matthew 7, the picture is quite different. Rather than the house being at once consumed in a fire, the house faces the more gradual trial of heavy rain. Unlike the house in 1 Corinthians 3, there is no inevitability of the house’s destruction here. It is only the house *wrongly built* that is destroyed. The one built on the rock foundation remains completely unharmed through the entire ordeal.

Notice that there is nothing stated here in Matthew 7 regarding any differences between the actual houses built by the wise and foolish builders. The only difference between them seems to be the foundation on which each house was built. The wise builder built on the correct foundation, and this pictures a disciple who is obedient to Jesus's teaching. The foolish builder built on the wrong foundation, picturing a disciple who disregards Jesus' teaching. Since the foundation, being under the house, is out-of-sight, there would at first be little if any noticeable difference between the two houses. It is not until the heavy rain eventually comes that the house built on a foundation of sand eventually falls.

Because the trial coming upon the house pictured here in Matthew 7 takes place over the course of time, and because the house itself will potentially either stand or fall, depending on the foundation that was laid, we should view the house as picturing a disciple's *profession of his faith* in Christ before the world. We will shortly look at what the rain, wind, and floods represent, but for now let us just see what Jesus is saying about the house and the foundation. A disciple of Jesus, if he wishes to fully maintain his testimony of Christ before others, ought to today make a conscious choice to obey the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Unlike the picture in 1 Corinthians 3, which pictures the all-at-once judgment of the future Judgment Seat of Christ, the picture here is of the gradual, day-by-day, moment-by-moment trials faced by the believer hoping to maintain his testimony of Christ in this life. Thus we see that the house in Jesus' illustration here in Matthew 7 pictures the disciple's *testimony of Christ*, a testimony that requires being firmly established on Jesus' teaching if it is to be maintained during the course of one's life.

Now, while the illustration of the house enduring the storm pictures the believer's testimony being maintained in this present life, it is important to notice that the phrase "will be compared to" here in Matthew 7:24 is actually given in the future tense. Though the righteous obedience to Jesus' teaching, pictured by the laying of the proper foundation, is certainly something taking place presently, the

final evaluation of the prudence of the builder will be at the future judgment. Though during the course of his life a disciple of Jesus may be looked down upon or ridiculed for his obedience to Jesus' words, and though the great majority of Jesus' hearers will be walking the "spacious way" of disregard for Jesus' strict instruction, there will come a day when the obedient disciple is viewed as the one who has chosen wisely.²⁰

Looking at the parallel verse in Luke 6:48 we see that the wise man "dug deep" in order to build his house on the proper foundation. Thus we see that this builder will have a greater amount of labor and difficulty than the one building on the sand, indicating that Jesus is illustrating that the obedient disciple will have greater difficulty in his work than will the one who disregards his teaching.

This "greater difficulty" which is faced by the obedient disciple brings us to an interesting, almost paradoxical truth. The obedient Christian life is indeed one of strenuous *labor*, yet through it all Jesus promises comfort and *rest*. In the natural world we see labor and rest as being mutually exclusive ideas. A person is either working or he is at rest. To be engaged in the one means you have ceased from the other. In the spiritual realm, however, things work differently. In Matthew 11:29 Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you...and you will find rest for you souls." The yoke is what constrained the beast of burden to the laborious task that he was being used for. Jesus says that he has such a yoke for each one who would come after him. However, Jesus says that in taking up that yoke, the disciple will "find rest." Because of the infinite power and availability of the Holy Spirit for the believer, the labor that Jesus requires, though at times it can be more physically strenuous than any required by a worldly taskmaster, actually produces an internal "rest" that enables the believer to carry on long after one's natural abilities would have failed. This is what the apostle Paul means when he says, "I worked harder than any of them, but not I, rather the grace of God that is with me" (1 Corinthians 15:10).

The closest comparison that I can make to something in human terms is the energy a man might exert in order to win or to please the woman he loves. In Genesis 29:20 we read about Jacob's service to Laban for the sake of Laban's daughter Rachel. It is said, "Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her." Those who have experience with this type of "love labor" can testify to its truth. Though you may be working longer and harder than anyone around you, the love in your heart creates a "lightness," almost an extra energy that makes you feel, once your labor is over, not exhausted, but even more rested than when you first began. The same can be said of the fellowship of the believer with God the Holy Spirit. Though we labor and strive to the maximum, it is still, if energized by the Holy Spirit, an experience of rest.

Now this rest should not be seen as a lazy or lethargic rest. To experience this "rest," ironically the believer must make a conscious decision to *work* for it. We must be diligent to resist the temptation to act out from our own will or our natural energy. The author of Hebrews phrases it this way, "Therefore, let us strive to enter that rest" (Hebrews 4:11). This is similar to what Jesus is saying in Luke 6:48 about the wise builder who "dug deep" to ensure his house had the proper foundation. There is indeed greater work in laying a proper foundation, but in a mysterious way, his experience will be more restful than the lazy builder who did not make the extra effort.

"And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and fell upon that house, and it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock."

Matthew 7:25

Since we are taking the standing or falling of the house to picture the personal testimony of the disciple, the specific aspects of the

rainstorm that Jesus describes here should be understood as being illustrative of those occurrences in the Christian life which could potentially damage or destroy that testimony.

Jesus first mentions the rain. Earlier on, in Matthew 5:45, rain pictured the working of God for benefit of men on the earth. In this verse, I take rain to still picture the working of God, but this time it is God's sovereign working for men's *testing*. Though the scriptures do state that God himself does not tempt anyone with sin (James 1:13), they also state that all temptation and trial that does come must be allowed by him (1 Corinthians 10:13). Satan himself must first get the permission of God before he can act to bring trials upon God's servants (Job 1:11,12; 2:4,5; Luke 22:31). The rain, which is foundationally a blessing for mankind, being the first aspect of the trial against the house, demonstrates that all the circumstances that come into the believer's life which may try his profession must be first approved by God himself.

Next Jesus mentions the floods and the wind. In Psalm 69:1-15 David uses the imagery of a flood encapsulating him as a description of the trying circumstances in his life from which he is awaiting God's deliverance. Wind, in the scriptures, is often a picture of the work of spiritual forces (see Daniel 7:2; Zechariah 6:5; Mark 13:27; and Revelation 7:1-3). It is interesting that Jesus first describes the rain failing, then the floods coming up, and then lastly describes the working of the wind against the standing of the house. The rain, which builds up to a flood is what threatens the house's foundation. Then it is the wind which threatens the house's ability to stand.

Jesus is painting a picture of the absolute necessity of establishing in one's heart a determination to follow his teaching. God will allow circumstances to come into the believer's life which will be trying. They may at times seem to be overwhelming, as they were with David in Psalm 69, to the point where they are like flood waters by which the disciple feels to be completely engulfed. It is at this point that the disciple of Jesus is most susceptible to the cunning working

of the “winds” of evil spirits who will try to knock him off of his standing.

If, as Jesus has commanded in the Sermon on the Mount, the disciple has resolved in his heart to, by God’s grace, be willing to suffer all forms evil from the hands of men with all love and grace; if the disciple has divorced himself from any love of the world’s goods, looking only to the future reward that will come from God in the next age; and most importantly, if the disciple will ask God daily for his empowering Spirit to help him with his righteousness, then that disciple can rest confidently knowing that his Christian testimony will withstand whatever attacks that evil spirits may level against him. Obedience to Jesus’ teaching will preserve the believer’s witness, and thus also his standing within the coming kingdom. “The house” will stand because it will have been “founded on the rock.”

The Foolish

**“And everyone who hears these words of mine
and does not do them will be compared to a
foolish man who built his house on the sand.”**

Matthew 7:26

Again, the issue being addressed in this illustration is a believer’s profession of faith, not his status of being justified before God. The two builders are not “righteous” and “unrighteous,” but rather “wise” and “foolish.” The foolish builder, just as much as the wise builder, pictures a believer, someone who “hears” Jesus’ words. Govett points out that in Luke 6:27 Jesus addresses those who are truly his disciples when he says, “But I say to *you who hear*, love your enemies...” Likewise in John 8:47 Jesus contrasts the hypocrites with genuine believers in himself by saying, “Whoever is of God *hears* God’s words. The reason why you *do not hear* is that you are not of God.”²¹ Therefore, even this foolish builder is a genuine believer, as he is described as one who “hears” Jesus’ words. The difference

between him and the wise builder is only that he takes the “spacious way” of walking according to a loose interpretation of Jesus’ teaching. The foolish builder does not, as the wise builder did, make the extra spiritual effort required to obey Jesus’ teachings in their fullness.

“And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and fell upon that house, and it fell, and its fall was great.”

Matthew 7:27

This last sentence of Jesus’ sermon was a sober warning, both for his disciples then and for us today. If those who hear Jesus’ words do not take them with the strictness and directness that Jesus is telling them to, then their testimony is in serious peril. It is true that the structure built on the sand may survive a while. While the weather remains pleasant, it may even, to an outside observer, be indistinguishable from the one built on the proper foundation. Similarly, a Christian life built around simple law-keeping can be maintained so long as the surrounding circumstances stay generally congenial. After all, everyone has his moral standards to some degree. The worldly have their social etiquettes and mores, and as long as everyone is getting along, a believer’s abiding by the Ten Commandments will be sufficient to maintain his position as being reckoned a moral, Christian person. At least temporarily, the “house” of his Christian witness will stand.

But Jesus assures us that the floods will come. Life circumstances will turn against the disciple and the powers of the enemy will, at some point, try to knock the believer off of his standing. When the worldly people insult and slander us, if we are not prepared to “rejoice and be glad,” considering our future inheritance rather than our present suffering (Matthew 5:12), then we will likely respond with the natural response of bitterness, anger, and eventually retaliation. If we are not, by the power of the Spirit, loving and

praying for our enemies (Matthew 5:44), then our flesh will cause us to hate and oppose them. If we disregard Jesus' teaching against using judicial power to defend ourselves (Matthew 5:40; 7:1), we will very quickly lose the essential sheep-like dependence on God for our guidance and protection. If we store up earthly treasure for ourselves, Jesus has already warned that our hearts will quickly become occupied with the things of world (Matthew 6:19-21), which will very quickly break us from the heavenly-mindedness necessary for maintaining our testimony in the face of opposition.

The experiences of the early disciples of Jesus testify that Jesus' warning is appropriate. Indeed the floods *will* come, and there will be the temptation to relinquish our hold on our testimony to one degree or another. Jesus has given us one way to ensure that we withstand this temptation and maintain our confession of faith, and that way is simple, unwavering obedience to his teachings.

Relation to the Future Kingdom

Again, we must notice that in Matthew 7:26, just as in 7:24, the verb in the phrase "will be compared to" is given in the future tense, while the verbs "hear" and "do" are given in the present tense. There is an important reason for this, and it links this concluding word with the "kingdom" message, the theme of the entire sermon.

As we have already seen, the house being built pictures the disciple's testimony of the Lord before men that he is to maintain. This is why Jesus uses the present tense when he says that it is the one who "hears" his words and "does" them. He is describing the disciples' obedience to his teaching *during the course of this present life*. This present obedience is what gives the believer's witness a solid foundation which will support it once the day of opposition comes.

However, though the obedience and the maintaining of one's testimony is something that takes place during the course of this life, the final evaluation of these things takes place at the future Judgment Seat of Christ. It will be there that Jesus will determine the believer's

worthiness or unworthiness to receive the reward of his kingdom. This is why Jesus uses the future tense when he says the disciple “will be compared to” either a wise or foolish builder. The actual experience of the believer’s testimony either being maintained or lost is something that takes place in the present, but the ramifications of this experience are in the future.

Throughout the entire New Testament, the believer’s maintaining of his profession of Christ is said to be a necessary criterion for receiving approval at the coming judgment seat and for receiving the reward of co-rulership with Jesus in the coming kingdom. Perhaps nowhere is this concept laid out more clearly than in the Jesus’ words in Matthew 10:32,33. Jesus had just told his disciples to be bold in their proclamation of the gospel, fearing the Lord, but having no fear of men (Matthew 10:26-28). He then went on to warn them, saying, “Everyone who confesses me before men, I will also confess him before my Father who is in the heavens. But whoever denies me before men, I also will deny him before my Father who is in the heavens.”

This is why this sober warning in Matthew 7:24-27 serves as an apt conclusion to Jesus’ entire Sermon on the Mount. The message of the sermon has been, as has been demonstrated throughout the course of this work, one about the hearing disciple’s potential reward of entrance into the coming millennial kingdom of Christ. The maintaining of his Christian testimony during the course of this present life is the foundational criterion for receiving this reward. If we deny him, then he will deny us. None who are truly the Lord’s can be eternally lost, but during the course of the thousand-year reign of Jesus that will commence upon the conclusion of this present age, many of the Lord’s who have been unfaithful during this present life will weep with disappointment²² over the loss that they will suffer.

If a disciple wants to be certain that he will be among those to whom Jesus says, “Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful over a little, I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your Master” (Matthew 25:21), then he must be able to maintain his

testimony in whatever circumstance he finds himself. To do this, Jesus says that he must lay as a foundation for all of his spiritual life the teaching and principles laid out by Jesus here in the Sermon on the Mount.

“Everyone who hears these words of mine *and does them...*”

I ask you, reader, as a disciple of Jesus, does this describe you? When you stand before your Lord and he evaluates the thoughts and intentions of your heart, when he judges the attitude that you showed toward your fellow believers, and when he considers the response that you gave to those who opposed you, will he determine that you lived by the same Spirit and according to the same principles that he himself lived by?

Or will he determine that you did no more than what have been the standards of the world? Did you lust and labor after the things of the world? Did you trust in human institutions, or even your own hands, for your provision and protection rather than in God? My friend, do not suppose that the approval of other men, even of other Christians, is sufficient. Jesus alone will be your judge on that day, and remember what he says concerning what becomes of those walking the spacious way. Approval by Jesus at his judgment seat requires, above all else, a heart-commitment of obedience to the actual teachings of Jesus. You must be the wise-builder! Do not allow anyone to soften Jesus’ commandments, nor his warnings. If you would receive the reward of the kingdom, and be spared the disciplinary hand of God when Jesus returns, then you must “build your house on the rock.” Determine even now to live, by the power of the Spirit of God, according to the standard of righteousness that Jesus has laid out here in the Sermon on the Mount.

¹ The word “enter” at the beginning of the command should preclude this view. It is possible for a road to be walked along *after* a gate is walked through, but this is only the case if the person is *leaving* rather than entering the city, property, or whatever else is being guarded by the gate. If Jesus had said, “exit

by the narrow gate,” then the assumption could be made that the road follows the gate, but that is not the case in this verse.

² MacArthur’s commentary lays out this view more clearly and unapologetically than any other that I have found. (MacArthur, 1985, pp. 449-458)

³ (Wilkin R. N., 2010, p. 35)

⁴ In our passage here in Matthew the word is simply, “Enter by...” where in Luke it is, “*Strive* to enter by...” Luke’s indication that the entrance requires difficulty and labor gives further evidence that in Matthew the gate ought to be seen as being at the end of the constricted road.

⁵ There is a textual variant in this verse that leads one possible translation to be “For the way is wide and spacious which leads to destruction,” leaving out the entire concept of a second “gate.” If this is indeed the correct rendering, then it would give even more credence to the notion that the primary focus is the one, narrow gate. There are indeed two ways, but only one leads to the gate, and the gate is the goal.

⁶ (Finley, 2007, p. 5)

⁷ Govett understood “the broad way” as I am presenting it here, and he also agreed with my view that the destinations of the two ways do not represent eternal destiny but rather millennial kingdom destiny. He saw “the gate,” however, not as the picture of the kingdom destination, but as the outset of the way. He saw the gate as picturing, not the new birth as some do, but the disciple’s conscious decision to accept Jesus’ words with their plain meaning. Thus, in my view, though he missed the picture of the path leading to the gated entrance to a city, he was still able to find Jesus’ real meaning.

⁸ (Govett, Sermon on the Mount, 1984, pp. 297,298)

⁹ Weirsbe states this assumption outright and thus leads to the inevitable conclusion that salvation from hell requires the kind of *work* that is quite clearly pictured by the walking of the “narrow way.” (Wiersbe, 1996) The subtle implication of a works gospel seems all but inevitable until one understands the distinction between judgment/salvation which is set before the genuine believer as pertaining to the millennial kingdom and the judgment/salvation which pertains to the final destinies of the lake of fire or the New Jerusalem. The former takes place *before* the millennium (1 Corinthians 4:5), the latter takes place after it (Revelation 20:6,11-15).

¹⁰ See chapter 3: **Jesus’ Teaching and the Law**, specifically the section concerning adultery.

¹¹ Other New Testament verses which illustrate this point include Luke 19:11-26 and Ephesians 5:5.

¹² Remember that some take this to be referring to the Decalogue or some other commandments from the Old Testament Law. I argue in chapter 3 of this work: **Jesus' Teaching and the Law**, that the phrase "these commandments" actually refers to the teaching that Jesus is about to bring in his own sermon.

¹³ Other scriptures which affirm this truth can be found in Matthew 25:14-30; 1 Corinthians 6:9,10; and Galatians 5:21.

¹⁴ Other verses teaching this concept include Matthew 18:33-35; 24:48-51; Luke 12:45-48; and Hebrews 10:28-31.

¹⁵ This, we will see shortly, is what is pictured by the illustration of the two builders at the end of the sermon.

¹⁶ My translation brings out this difference by using the two different words "bad" and "evil" in verses 17 and 18, which are good translations of the Greek words "σαρρός" (bad) and "πονηρός" (evil). Unfortunately it is not as clear when I use the same word "good" to translate both the Greek words "ἀγαθός" and "καλός." There are simply no words that I am aware of that convey the translation of either Greek word as well as the English word "good." I admire the effort of the translators of the ESV, who use different English words for all four Greek words, but in my opinion their final translation ends up deviating too far from the literal meaning of the text. In our translation we will have to settle for using the same English word "good," while explaining in either the margin or commentary that there are actually two different Greek words being used.

¹⁷ Those who directly associate entrance into the kingdom with being born again often use this text to argue against the freeness of God's offer of eternal life. Simple belief, so the argument goes, is not enough, since here it is the ones who "do," rather than the ones who "believe," who gain entrance into the kingdom. An understanding of the kingdom as being an aspect of reward, rather than of gift, helps to avoid this error.

On the other hand, there are some who do believe in the freeness of God's grace, but still do not see kingdom entrance as an aspect of reward, but as an aspect of the free gift. Some of these have gotten around the difficulty presented in this passage by interpreting it by citing John 6:29. In that passage Jesus says, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." These argue that the specific work of God that Jesus is referring to here in Matthew 7:21 as the requirement for entrance into the kingdom is the work of believing in Jesus. This is highly unlikely in my view.

Firstly, the subject matter of the entire sermon up to this point has been experiential righteousness as it pertains to believers. Therefore, unless there is a good contextual reason to think otherwise, our first thought should be that experiential righteousness is what is being referred to here as well. Secondly,

Jesus does not use the phrase “work of God,” as he did in John 6, rather he uses the phrase “will of my Father,” which is a phrase used multiple times in the book of Matthew. When Matthew quotes Jesus as using the phrase “will of my Father,” he either refers to God’s providential will, as in Matthew 18:14, or he means, as I take him to be meaning here in Matthew 7:21, the experiential righteousness that God desires from his people. Most tellingly, in Matthew 21:28-32, when Jesus is telling the parable of the two sons, it is the one who gave to his father practical obedience that is said to have done “the will of his father.” Never, to my knowledge, does the phrase “the will of my Father” refer specifically to the simple belief in Jesus that is required for the reception of eternal life.

¹⁸ Many times modern Christians will refer to their salvation as being their “personal relationship with Jesus.” This has caused many to understand Jesus’ use of the expression “I never knew you” as proving that these false prophets were unregenerate men. This is not necessarily the case, and there is good reason to think that Jesus is saying that this could be a declaration that he makes to some who *are* genuinely born-again.

As explained earlier in the text of this work, the Greek word γινώσκω, does not necessarily refer exclusively to the establishment of any relationship at all, but often refers to a level of intimacy and involvement within a relationship. In Matthew 1:25 it is said of Mary that Joseph “did not know her” until she had given birth to Jesus. Certainly this does not mean that Joseph had no relationship with Mary, the two got married during the pregnancy! The phrase only meant they had not yet engaged in sexual intimacy. The same word γινώσκω is used there as is used here in Matthew 7:23. Based on its context, we should understand the word here in Matthew 7:23 to be referring to the type of involvement that the false prophets claim Jesus had with their ministry. They state that their works were done in Jesus’ name. He rebuffs by saying that he never “knew” them, meaning that his relationship with them was not what they were claiming it was. Nothing in the text implies that these were necessarily unbelievers.

The fact that these false prophets are present at the pre-kingdom judgment seat of Christ implies to me that they are either survivors of the tribulation period or else are believers who have been resurrected, which would imply that they are, in fact, believers. The fact that false-prophets can arise from among those who are genuinely believers should not surprise us. Paul mentioned to the Ephesian elders that even among themselves there would “arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:30 ESV). Genuine believers, even those whom the apostles recognized as being spiritual

leaders of the assembly, have the potential to leave the narrow path to kingdom reward, and can even be found among those leading others astray as false prophets.

¹⁹ See 1 Corinthians 10:4.

²⁰ There is a textual variant that makes it somewhat unclear as to who will be comparing the disciple to the wise builder. Note that in my translation the word “compared” is in the third person passive (“he will be compared”). Some manuscripts have the Greek word for “compared” (Greek: “ὁμοιόω”) in the first person active, also inserting the word “him” (Greek: “αὐτόν”) making the translation, “I will compare him.” In the latter translation it is clear that the Lord himself will make this positive comparison, where in the former, what I believe to be the preferable translation, it could be anyone, or possibly everyone, who will view the obedient disciple as the more prudent. I see in this teaching a subtle implication that some who may be ridiculing strict obedience to Jesus today will be forced to concede in the future that it was the better view all along.

²¹ (Govett, Sermon on the Mount, 1984, p. 356)

²² In Matthew 25:30, it is the unfaithful disciple who is said to be cast into “the darkness outside,” picturing the exclusion from the joy of the millennial kingdom. While some may find it shocking that Jesus would say that genuine believers will be placed where there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth,” we should notice that it is not until after the millennium, in Revelation 21:4, once believers enter the New Jerusalem, that God is said to “wipe away every tear.” If there will be tears to be wiped at that point, then it seems fair to assume that there will indeed be tears during the millennium, even for some who will thereafter enter eternity future in the New Jerusalem.

ADDENDUM:

NOTES ON THE SERMON'S CONTEXT

MATTHEW 4:12-5:2

This present work was based on a collection of notes that I put together when I was teaching through the Sermon on the Mount. Prior to getting into the text of the sermon, however, a few lessons were given regarding the sermons immediate context. These contextual points were originally intended to be placed at the front of this work, but when combined with the introductory chapter regarding “the kingdom” there seemed to me to be far too many words for the reader to get through before even getting into the text of the Lord’s sermon. Therefore I decided to remove the section regarding the sermon’s context from the body of the work and add it on as an addendum in the back. I pray that the reader finds them helpful in gaining a full understanding of Jesus’ kingdom message as found in his most famous sermon.

Now, there are three aspects of the context of the Sermon on the Mount that will be addressed. Firstly, there is the historical/prophetic context: What has been spoken in Jewish history previously about the kingdom to which Jesus refers? Secondly, there is the present/local context: What was going on in the area around Jesus leading up to the giving of the Sermon on the Mount? Finally, we will notice the immediate context into which Jesus spoke by noticing who was his direct audience for the sermon.

Historical/Prophetic Context

It must be noted up-front that Jesus was not the first person to address this matter of “the kingdom.” For centuries, the prophets of Israel had told of a coming time when Israel would be restored to its position as the prominent nation on the earth, and that during that period the earth would be restored to a blissful condition of peace and righteousness (Isaiah 2:2-4). Most importantly, it was said that the Lord Jehovah himself would rule and reign from Zion in Jerusalem (Isaiah 24:23, Zechariah 14:8,9). Since the early days of God’s dealing with man, there have been prophecies about a promised deliverer, the Messiah, who was to come, not only as king of Israel (Zechariah 9:9), but as the redeemer of all of mankind (Genesis 3:15; 22:18; Job 19:25).

Something very important to understand regarding the context of his teaching is that Jesus was, in one sense, giving a *clarification* for what had been spoken before about the coming Messiah of Israel and the kingdom that he would bring.

While the Jews of Jesus’ day were eagerly expecting the appearance of the Christ (or Messiah), their understanding of just who this one would be seemed to be limited exclusively to his predicted role as liberator and ruler of Israel. The fact that this would indeed be the role of the coming Messiah is made clear by much of Old Testament prophecy. The Jews apparently wanted to emphasize this aspect of prophecy, as they were longing for their liberation from the Romans and for the establishment of their own kingdom.

Jesus, on the other hand, while certainly not denying this regal function of the coming Christ, needed first of all to explain the *spiritual* nature of his messianic kingdom and the spiritual condition of those who would possess it.

“Blessed are the poor *in spirit*, for theirs is the kingdom.”

As demonstrated by its introductory sentence, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is explaining to his hearers the spiritual condition of those to whom his future kingdom will belong.

Present/Local Context

We will look next at what Matthew the evangelist describes as happening locally immediately preceding Jesus' giving of the Sermon on the Mount. We will do so by noticing a few points made in earlier chapters in Matthew's gospel.

Messianic Chatter

Prior to Jesus' appearance on the scene, there had been much talk among the Jews about a glorious "age to come" for the nation of Israel, and especially about the Messiah who was to come and usher in this age. Luke 2:38 mentions that there were many around the time of Jesus' birth who were waiting for "the redemption of Jerusalem." Acts 5:35-37 describes two occasions around this time where men had risen up as revolutionaries and gathered large followings for themselves. Certainly these revolutionaries were making messianic claims about themselves, exploiting the eager expectation of the Jews for the promised messianic kingdom. The coming of the magi to Jerusalem described in Matthew 2:1-12 showed that even among the Gentiles there was an interest being generated about Israel and her messianic hope. All of this "messianic chatter" going on in Jerusalem helps to explain why so many were willing to venture out into the wilderness to hear an interesting character make proclamations about a kingdom drawing near (Matthew 3:1-6).

John the Baptist – Matthew 3:1-11

The word of God from the mouth of a prophet had not been heard by the nation of Israel for centuries. You can imagine, then, how much of a stir was caused when, all of a sudden, the rather eccentric John the Baptist came on the scene and began speaking like one of the prophets of old.

John's message was unabashedly, and not surprisingly considering the content of our study, about the coming of a *kingdom*. John's phraseology is important to notice. This imminent kingdom, according to John, was not going to consist of the invasion and

overtaking of one earthly empire by another after the manner of the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, or the Romans. Rather, John, like the prophets before him, spoke of a kingdom that was to be “of the heavens” (Daniel 2:34,44,45; Matthew 3:2). Many from within Israel began going out to hear this new prophet of God. John was baptizing all who were willing to “repent” in light of the coming heavenly kingdom.

Most in Israel, including Herod the political ruler, and the Pharisees who were among the religious rulers, rejected John the Baptist and his call to repentance (Luke 3:19,20; 7:30). John was eventually arrested and put in prison. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount was given within this immediate context of John’s ministry and Israel’s response to him.

Having learned of John the Baptist’s arrest, Jesus withdrew to Galilee (Matthew 4:12), and began to proclaim the same message as did John his forerunner, “Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens has drawn nigh” (Matthew 3:2; 4:17). The coming of “the kingdom of the heavens” was the primary message of John’s ministry, and was the first message heralded by the Lord Jesus.

Jesus’ Kingdom Proclamation – Matthew 4:12-17

Matthew describes both Jesus and John the Baptist as proclaiming to Israel the soon arrival of the heavenly kingdom (Matthew 3:2; 4:17). However, the prophecies quoted by Matthew show that there was a small but important difference between John’s and Jesus’ messages. While both John and Jesus spoke about the arrival of the kingdom and of the Messiah, Jesus in addition spoke of some important changes that would come as a result of his arrival as the Messiah.

While both John the Baptist and Jesus similarly gave a call to repentance, John’s call seems to have been given exclusively to the nation of Israel. Referring to John the Baptist, Matthew quotes the prophet Isaiah saying, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’” (Matthew 3:3; Isaiah 40:3) This prophecy in Isaiah was given specifically in

regard to Israel as a nation. Looking at the broader context in Isaiah, the prophet says, “Comfort, comfort *my people* says your God. Speak tenderly *to Jerusalem* and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins. A voice cries in the wilderness...” (Isaiah 40:1-3) John the Baptist’s purpose was to call the *nation of Israel* to repent in preparation for the appearance of its Messiah.

In regard to Jesus, however, Matthew quotes a different prophecy from Isaiah. In this prophecy Isaiah was foretelling what would be a profound and unique purpose for the coming Messiah, a purpose that goes beyond Israel, reaching to the Gentile nations (Matthew 4:15-16).

Long ago God had promised Abraham that he would have a coming “seed” or offspring, which would be a blessing to *all the nations* (Genesis 12:3; 26:4). Despite this promise, from the time of Moses up through the time of John the Baptist there was, as the apostle Paul phrased it, a “wall of hostility” (Ephesians 2:14) between the Jews and the other nations. This wall had much to do with the Mosaic Law itself. The Israelites, according to the Mosaic Law, were forbidden from intermarriage with the Gentile nations whom they had dispossessed in coming into the promised land (Deuteronomy 7:3). There were also very strict ceremonial laws given that would distinguish the Israelites from all the nations around them. God had made extreme restrictions so that the Israelites might be preserved from the corrupting influence of the idolatry of the surrounding nations (Deuteronomy 7:4).

Things change, however, with the coming of the Messiah (or “Christ”). The Messiah’s coming, as Isaiah had predicted, was to set Israel free to fulfill her God-given purpose of blessing the Gentiles. Additionally, in Ephesians 2:11-21, Paul shows that the nation of Israel will not always be so divided from the Gentiles. With the coming of “the Christ” the nation of Israel was given the opportunity to become, as she was called to be, a blessing to all the nations.

Isaiah chapter nine, the passage that Matthew the evangelist quotes in the section introducing Jesus' ministry, says, "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee *of the Gentiles*- the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned" (Matthew 4:15,16; Isaiah 9:1,2). While John's ministry appeared to be confined to Judea to the south in Israel, calling the nation to repentance, Jesus' ministry took place to the north in "Galilee of the Gentiles." This ministry of Jesus to the Gentiles (or "nations"), gives the first hint toward the later developed truth that Jesus was himself the promised seed of Abraham, who brings the good news to all the nations (Galatians 3:16).

This is an important point to notice about the context for the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew is saying that Jesus' ministry is not limited to the Jews, but has also to do with the Gentiles. The importance of understanding Matthew's emphasis on this particular aspect of Jesus' role as the Christ will become increasingly apparent. The brief reference to God's future dealings with the Gentiles will prove vital toward gaining a proper understanding of Jesus' instruction and of his revelation concerning "the kingdom of the heavens."

Jesus Immediate Audience – Matthew 4:18-25

Our last point: Who exactly is Jesus addressing here in Matthew 5-7? Matthew's answer to this question, we will find, runs contrary to the claims of many modern commentators.

Matthew describes Jesus audience as being comprised of two groups: the disciples and the crowds.

Having just commenced his public ministry with the call to repentance, Jesus immediately set out to begin calling his disciples (Matthew 4:18-22). Jesus went first to Simon Peter and his brother Andrew and then to James and John. These men were fishermen, but Jesus tells them that he will make them "fishers of men." He calls them to leave their earthly vocation for a new, heavenly one. They all

left and followed Jesus immediately. To these men would be added a few more, and these would comprise the group who are referred to as Jesus' "disciples."

These disciples, those who committed themselves to leave all and follow Jesus were not, however, the only people within the sound of Jesus' voice as he taught on the mountain.

Toward the end of chapter four, Matthew describes "the crowds." While Matthew the evangelist describes John the Baptist's hearers as having come from "Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan" (Matthew 3:5; essentially Jewish areas), he says that Jesus' fame spread "throughout all Syria" and that "great crowds followed him," not only from the Jewish influenced areas of Jerusalem and Judea, but also from the Gentile influenced areas of Galilee and the Decapolis (Matthew 4:25). While John's influence was to the south, only really throughout Jerusalem and Judea, Jesus' became larger, spread further, and began to influence the Gentile areas. The miraculous healings that Jesus performed among the people greatly increased his fame, well beyond that of John the Baptist (see also John 4:1), to the point where great crowds began to follow him.

The beginning of chapter five of Matthew's gospel divides Jesus' followers into these two groups: the crowds and the disciples. While the Jew and Gentile distinction had been important for centuries, Matthew would have us notice this other distinction between the crowds and the disciples. The crowds were composed of both Jews and Gentiles (Matthew 4:25). Similarly, the disciples, though of Jewish descent, were from the region referred to as "Galilee of the Gentiles," in the north of the land of Israel. Matthew is subtly indicating to us that the Jew/Gentile distinction is fading as the crowd/disciple distinction is becoming more important.

Jesus' Target Audience

While it may seem a bit trivial, I point out this distinction between the crowds and the disciples in order to emphasize an important detail.

Immediately before Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount, though he takes notice of the crowds around him (5:1), it is *the disciples* that come to him and it is *they* whom he begins to teach (5:2). This will be a key point to bear in mind while studying and applying Jesus' teaching: The principles of the kingdom are explained specifically for *disciples*. It is the disciples, at this point exclusively Jewish, but more importantly having already made the decision to leave all and follow Jesus, who are the target audience for the Sermon on the Mount. The crowds, composed of both Jews and Gentiles, and not necessarily having made any solemn commitment to follow Jesus, are *not* Jesus' primary audience.

Though many commentators attempt to make it such,¹ the message that Jesus brings in this section is not a general *call to discipleship*. Jesus will give that *general call* to discipleship at a later time (Matthew 11:28-30, Mark 8:34-37). The Sermon on the Mount, however, is directed toward those who are already considered to be Jesus' disciples, and it is a discourse that he intends for this immediate audience of committed followers to obey. Note that Jesus had previously given a general call to repentance, in anticipation of the coming kingdom. It is to those who had responded to that first call to repentance that Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, now offers the opportunity to enter the kingdom. Again, Jesus had already called men to repentance and discipleship (Matthew 4:17,19); he now begins, in the Sermon on the Mount, to teach his disciples how they can receive the reward of his kingdom.

However, despite being given to the disciples, the Sermon on the Mount should not be seen as something secretive or mysterious that Jesus intends for only a few to understand. There were times when Jesus did want the meaning of his message to be concealed. After the kingdom message was largely rejected by the nation of Israel, Jesus used this "mystery" method of teaching, using what have been termed his "parables" (Matthew 13:2,10-13), to instruct his disciples while hiding his meaning from the surrounding crowds. The Sermon on the Mount, however, is not designed that way. It is not something

secretive or mysterious. Though this instruction in the Sermon on the Mount was directed toward his disciples, Jesus clearly spoke so that the crowds around could hear and could understand. Jesus was well aware of the fact that the crowds would be affected by what he was saying to his disciples. As he finished the teaching on the mountain, it was the *crowds* who were astonished at the authority with which he spoke, and the crowds were the first to whom he began to minister once he came down from the mountain (Matthew 7:28-8:1). Jesus even discussed, in his message, the intended effect that his disciples are to have on the world around them (Matthew 5:13-16).

The first two verses of chapter five summarize well the target audience of Jesus' teaching on the mount, "Seeing the crowds he went up...his disciples came to him...and he taught them, saying..." The sermon is a private conversation made public. The disciples are being taught, while the crowds are listening in.

The Importance of the Context

As with all exegesis, and the Sermon on the Mount is no exception, discerning correct interpretation requires a clear understanding of *context*. If the context is missed, it is likely that so also will be the proper interpretation.

What then are the implications surrounding the contextual points already mentioned? Well, first consider the point about Matthew being careful to point out Jesus' messianic purpose regarding the nation of Israel, especially as it pertains to the Gentiles. This point is significant because there are those who note the Jewish elements within Jesus' teaching, such as the teaching regarding the Law and Prophets (5:17, 7:12) and the reference to offering a gift at the altar (5:23,24), but then wrongly conclude that Jesus' audience is *exclusively* the nation of Israel. Some even go so far as to call Jesus' teaching "Old Covenant doctrine" that will not directly apply to believers who will comprise the Church. An understanding of Matthew's concept of Jesus' messianic purpose as it pertains to Israel *and to the Gentiles* will help preclude this error.

While it is true that all of Jesus' original disciples were Jewish themselves, it is equally clear that his future disciples will be from among both the Jews and the Gentiles, and Jesus' instructions, warnings, and commands will equally apply to both groups. Matthew hints at this by mentioning that the crowds who were being influenced by the teaching were from both Jewish and Gentile regions (4:25), and by noting that the Jewish disciples themselves were from "Galilee of the Gentiles" (4:15). The matter becomes undeniably clear when Jesus later charges these original Jewish disciples to "make disciples *of all nations*...teaching them to *obey all that I have commanded you*" (Matthew 28:19,20). So, all of Jesus disciples, both Jews and Gentiles, are obliged to take heed to Jesus' teaching of the Sermon on the Mount.

Next, let's look at the significance of recognizing the disciples as Jesus' primary target audience. There are some who would attempt to make Jesus' words out to be a general ethical standard by which society in this age is to be governed. Jesus' warning not to "give your holy things unto dogs" (Matthew 7:6), mandates *against* this idea. As was shared earlier, the kingdom reward that Jesus speaks of throughout the sermon can only be set before those who have already been born again through their belief in Jesus. Thus, the instruction given by Jesus was actually intended solely for those who are consecrated to follow and obey him. The teaching is wholly inadequate for civil governance or any other form of an ethical standard for non-believers. Further explanation of this concept can be found elsewhere in this work (see chapter 7: **Concerning Judgment** as well as chapter 9: **Conclusion**).

In summary, Jesus did not intend his teaching to be given to evil men, or to mankind in general. The kingdom message delivered by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is only properly understood when seen as having been directly given to those who have committed themselves to follow Jesus, and who have been given his Spirit, that they may be willing and able to obey.

¹ (MacArthur, 1985, p. 136) This mistake by John MacArthur sadly has a ripple effect through much of his understanding of Jesus' teaching. His assumption that Jesus is calling rather than training disciples leads to his pervasive error of seeing both the temporal and millennial judgments warned about by Jesus and the apostles throughout the New Testament as being warnings about final judgment for false-professors or unbelievers who are supposedly deluded into thinking that they are genuine believers. More on this topic is discussed in chapter 9 of this work which expounds upon Jesus' concluding statements for the Sermon on the Mount.

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