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The Disciple-Making Minister

Biblical Principles for Fruitfulness and Multiplication

By David Servant

Chapter Eight

The Sermon on the Mount

Because of his desire to make disciples, teaching them to obey all that Christ commanded, the disciple-making minister will be very interested in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. There is no lengthier recorded sermon of Jesus, and it is full of His commandments. The disciple-making minister will want to obey as well as teach his disciples everything Jesus commanded in that sermon.

This being so, I'm going to share what I understand about that sermon contained in Matthew chapters 5-7. I encourage ministers to teach their disciples the Sermon on the Mount verse by verse. Hopefully what I've written will be helpful to that end.

Below is an outline of the Sermon on the Mount, just to give us a general overview and to highlight the primary themes.

- I.) Jesus gathers His audience (5:1-2)
- II.) Introduction (5:3-20)
 - A.) The characteristics and blessings of the blessed (5:3-12)
 - B.) Admonition to continue being salt and light (5:13-16)
 - C.) The Law's relationship with Christ's followers (5:17-20)
- III.) The Sermon: Be more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees (5:21-7:12)
 - A.) Love each other, unlike the scribes and Pharisees (5:21-26)
 - B.) Be sexually pure, unlike the scribes and Pharisees (5:27-32)
 - C.) Be honest, unlike the scribes and Pharisees (5:33-37)
 - D.) Don't take revenge, as do the scribes and Pharisees (5:38-42)
 - E.) Don't hate your enemies, as do the scribes and Pharisees (5:43-48)
 - F.) Do good for the right motives, unlike the scribes and Pharisees (6:1-18)
 - 1.) Give to the poor for the right motives (6:2-4)
 - 2.) Pray for the right motives (6:5-6)
 - 3.) A digression regarding prayer and forgiveness (6:7-15)
 - a.) Instructions concerning prayer (6:7-13)
 - b.) The necessity of forgiving each other (6:8-15)
 - 4.) Fast for the right motives (6:16-18)
 - G.) Don't serve money, as do the scribes and Pharisees (6:19-34)
 - H.) Don't find little faults with your brothers (7:1-5)
 - I.) Don't waste your time giving truth to the unappreciative (7:6)

- J.) Encouragement to pray (7:7-11)
- IV.) Conclusion: A Summary of the Sermon
 - A.) A summarizing statement (7:12)
 - B.) An admonition to obey (7:13-14)
 - C.) How to recognize false prophets and false believers (7:15-23)
 - D.) A final warning against disobedience and a summary (7:24-27)

Jesus Gathers His Audience

And when He saw the multitudes, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. And opening His mouth He began to teach them (Matt. 5:1-2).

It seems as if Jesus purposely reduced the size of His audience by walking away from the “multitudes” and up a mountain. We are told that “His disciples came to Him,” as if to indicate that only those who were hungry to hear Him were willing to huff and puff up the mountain to where He finally rested. Apparently there were quite a few; they are called “the crowds” in 7:28.

Jesus then began His sermon, speaking to His disciples, and from the start we get a hint of what His overriding theme will be. He tells them that they are blessed if they possess certain characteristics, because those characteristics belong to the heaven-bound. That will be His overall theme for this sermon—*Only the holy will inherit God’s kingdom*. The Beatitudes, as they are called, found in 5:3-12, abound with this theme.

Jesus enumerated a number of different traits that characterize the blessed people, and He promised a number of specific blessings to them. Casual readers often assume that each Christian should find himself in one, and only one, Beatitude. Careful readers, however, realize that Jesus was not listing different kinds of believers who will receive varied blessings, but *all true believers* who will receive *one* all-encompassing future blessing: inheriting the kingdom of heaven. There is no other intelligent way to interpret His words:

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

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matt. 5:3-12).

The Blessings and Character Traits

First, let’s consider all the blessings promised. Jesus said that the blessed shall (1) inherit the kingdom of heaven, (2) receive comfort, (3) inherit the earth, (4) be satisfied, (5) receive mercy, (6) see God, (7) be called God’s sons, and (8) inherit the kingdom of heaven (a repeat of #1).

Does Jesus want us to think that only the poor in spirit and those who have been persecuted for righteousness will inherit God’s kingdom? Will only the pure in heart see

God and only the peacemakers be called sons of God, while neither shall inherit God's kingdom? Will the peacemakers not receive mercy and the merciful not be called sons of God? Obviously these would all be wrong conclusions. Therefore, it is only safe to conclude that the many blessings promised are the manifold blessings of one big blessing—inheriting God's kingdom.

Now let's consider the different traits Jesus described: (1) poor in spirit, (2) mournful, (3) gentle, (4) hungering for righteousness, (5) merciful, (6) pure of heart, (7) peacemaking, and (8) persecuted.

Does Jesus want us to think that a person can be *pure in heart yet unmerciful*? Can one be *persecuted for the sake of righteousness* but not be one who *hunger and thirsts after righteousness*? Again, obviously not. The many character traits of the blessed are the manifold traits shared, to some degree, by *all* the blessed.

Clearly, the Beatitudes describe the character traits of Jesus' true followers. By enumerating those traits to His disciples, Jesus assured them that they were the blessed people who are saved and who would enjoy heaven one day. Currently, they might not feel so blessed because of their sufferings, and the on-looking world might not consider them blessed, but in God's eyes they were.

People who do *not* fit Jesus' description are not blessed and will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. Every disciple-making pastor feels an obligation to make sure the people within his flock know that.

The Character Traits of the Blessed

The eight traits of the blessed are subject to some degree of interpretation. For example, what is virtuous about being "poor in spirit"? I tend to think that Jesus was describing the first necessary trait a person must possess if he is going to be saved—he must realize his own spiritual poverty. One must first see his need for a Savior before he can be saved, and there were those kinds of people among Jesus' audience who had just realized their own wretchedness. How blessed were they compared to the proud in Israel who were so blind to their sins!

This first trait eliminates all self-sufficiency and any thought of meriting salvation. The truly blessed person is one who realizes that he has nothing to offer God and that his own righteousness is as "filthy rags" (Is. 64:6, KJV).

Jesus did not want anyone to think that purely by his own self-effort could he possess the traits of the blessed. No, people are blessed, that is, *blessed by God* if they possess the characteristics of the blessed. It all springs from God's grace. The blessed people Jesus was speaking of were blessed, not only because of what awaited them in heaven, but because of the work God had done in their lives on earth. When I see the traits of the blessed in my life, it should remind me not of what I've done, but of what God has done in me by His grace.

The Mournful

If the first characteristic is listed first because it is the first necessary trait of the heaven-bound, perhaps the second trait is also listed meaningfully: "Blessed are those who mourn" (Matt. 5:4). Could Jesus have been describing heartfelt repentance and remorse? I think so, especially since Scripture is clear that godly sorrow results in a repentance that is necessary for salvation (see 2 Cor. 7:10). The mournful tax collector of whom Jesus once spoke is an example of this kind of blessed person. He humbly bowed his head in the Temple, beating his breast and crying out for God's mercy. Unlike the nearby Pharisee who, as he prayed, proudly reminded God that he tithed and fasted twice a week, the tax gatherer left that place forgiven of his sins. In that story, the tax collector was blessed; the Pharisee was not (see Luke 18:9-14). I suspect that there were those among Jesus' audience who, under the

conviction of the Holy Spirit, were mourning. Comfort from the Holy Spirit would soon be theirs!

If Jesus was not speaking of the initial mourning of the repentant person who is just coming to Christ, then perhaps He was describing the sorrow all true believers sense as they continually face a world that is in rebellion against the God who loves them. Paul expressed it as “great sorrow and unceasing grief in [his] heart” (Rom. 9:2).

The Gentle

The third characteristic, gentleness, is also listed in Scripture as one of the fruits of the Spirit (see Gal. 5:22-23). Gentleness is not a self-generated attribute. Those who have received the grace of God and the indwelling of the Spirit are also blessed to be made gentle. They will one day inherit the earth, since only the righteous will dwell on the new earth that God creates. Professing Christians who are harsh and violent should beware. They are not among the blessed.

Hungering for Righteousness

The fourth characteristic, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, describes the God-given inward longing that every true born-again person possesses. He is grieved by all the unrighteousness in the world and in what remains in himself. He hates sin (see Ps. 97:10; 119:128, 163) and loves righteousness.

Too often, when we read the word *righteousness* in Scripture, we immediately translate it, “the legal standing of righteousness imputed to us by Christ,” but that is not always what the word means. Quite often it means, “the quality of living righteously by God’s standards.” That is obviously the meaning Jesus intended here, because there is no reason for a Christian to hunger for what he already possesses. Those who have been born of the Spirit long to *live* righteously, and they have assurance that they will “be satisfied” (Matt. 5:6), certain that God, by His grace, will complete the work He’s begun in them (see Phil. 1:6).

Jesus’ words here also foresee the time of the new earth, an earth “in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet. 3:13). Then there will be no sin. Everyone will love God with all his heart and love his neighbor as himself. We who now hunger and thirst for righteousness will then be satisfied. Finally our heart-felt prayer will be fully answered, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10).

The Merciful

The fifth trait, mercifulness, is also one that every born-again person naturally possesses by virtue of his having the merciful God living within him. Those who possess no mercy are not blessed of God and reveal that they are not partakers of His grace. The apostle James concurs: “Judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy” (Jas. 2:13). If one stands before God and receives a merciless judgment, do you think he would go to heaven or hell?¹ The answer is obvious.

Jesus once told a story of a servant who had received great mercy from his master, but who was then unwilling to extend some mercy to his fellow servant. When his master discovered what had happened, he “handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him” (Matt 18:34). All his formerly-forgiven debt was reinstated. Then Jesus warned His disciples, “My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart” (Matt. 18:35). Thus to refuse to forgive

¹ Interestingly, the very next verse in the book of James is, “What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?” (Jas. 2:14).

a brother or sister in Christ who asks for forgiveness results in the reinstatement of our formerly-forgiven sins. That results in our being handed over to the torturers until we repay what we can never repay. That sure doesn't sound like heaven to me. Again, non-merciful people will not receive mercy from God. They are not among the blessed.

The Pure in Heart

The sixth trait of the heaven-bound is purity of heart. Unlike so many professing Christians, true followers of Christ are not just outwardly holy. By God's grace, their hearts have been made pure. They truly love God from their hearts, and it affects their meditations and motives. Jesus promised that they shall see God.

Again may I ask, are we to believe that there are true Christian believers who are *not* pure in heart and who therefore will *not* see God? Is God going to say to them, "You can come into heaven, but you can't ever see Me"? No, obviously *every* true heaven-bound person has a pure heart.

The Peacemakers

Peacemakers are listed next. They will be called sons of God. Again, Jesus must have been describing every true follower of Christ, because everyone who believes in Christ is a son of God (see Gal. 3:26).

Those who are born of the Spirit are peacemakers in at least three ways:

First, they've made peace with God, one who was formerly their enemy (see Rom. 5:10).

Second, they live in peace, as far as possible, with other people. They're not characterized by dissensions and strife. Paul wrote that those who practice strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions and factions will not inherit God's kingdom (see Gal. 5:19-21). True believers will go the extra mile to avoid a fight and keep peace in their relationships. They do not claim to be at peace with God while not loving their brother (see Matt. 5:23-24; 1 John 4:20).

Third, by sharing the gospel, true followers of Christ also help others make peace with God and their fellow man. Perhaps alluding to this very verse of the Sermon on the Mount, James wrote, "And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace" (Jas. 3:18).

The Persecuted

Finally, Jesus called *blessed* those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness. Obviously, He was speaking of people who are *living* righteously, not just those who *think* that Christ's righteousness has been imputed to them. People who obey Christ's commandments are the ones whom nonbelievers persecute. They will inherit God's kingdom.

What kind of persecution was Jesus talking about? Torture? Martyrdom? No, He specifically listed being insulted and spoken against on His account. This again indicates that when a person is a true Christian, it is obvious to nonbelievers, otherwise nonbelievers wouldn't say evil things against him. How many so-called Christians are so indistinguishable from nonbelievers that not a single unbeliever speaks against them? They are not really Christians at all. As Jesus said, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for in the same way their fathers used to treat the false prophets" (Luke 6:26). When all men speak well of you, that's a sign that you're a false believer. The world hates true Christians (see also John 15:18-21; Gal. 4:29; 2 Tim. 3:12; 1 John 3:13-14).

Salt and Light

Once Jesus had assured His obedient disciples that they were indeed among the transformed and blessed people who were destined to inherit the kingdom of heaven, He raised a word of caution. Unlike many modern preachers who continually assure spiritual goats that they could never forfeit the salvation they supposedly possess, Jesus loved His true disciples enough to warn them that they could indeed remove themselves from the category of the blessed.

You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven (Matt. 5:13-16).

Notice that Jesus didn't exhort His disciples to *become* salt or *become* light. He said (metaphorically) that they already *were* salt, and He exhorted them to *remain* salty. He said (metaphorically) that they already *were* light, and exhorted them not to let their light be hidden, but to continue shining. How this stands in contrast to the many sermons given to professing Christians of their need to *become* salt and light. If people aren't already salt and light, they aren't Christ's disciples. They aren't among the blessed. They aren't going to heaven.

In Jesus' time, salt was used primarily as a preservative of meats. As obedient followers of Christ, we are what preserves this sinful world from becoming completely rotten and corrupt. But if we become like the world in our behavior, we are truly "no longer good for anything" (v. 13). Jesus warned the blessed to remain salty, preserving their unique characteristics. They must remain distinct from the world around them, lest they become "unsalty," deserving to be "thrown out and trampled under foot." This is one of many clear warnings against backsliding found in the New Testament that is directed at true believers. If salt is truly salt, it is salty. Likewise, followers of Jesus act like followers of Jesus, otherwise they aren't followers of Jesus, even if they once were.

Christ's true followers are also the light of the world. Light *always* shines. If it isn't shining, it isn't light. In this analogy, light represents our good works (see Matt. 5:16). Jesus wasn't exhorting those who have no works to drum some up, but exhorting those who have good works not to hide their goodness from others. By so doing, they would glorify their heavenly Father because His work in them is the source of their goodness. Here we see a beautiful balance of God's gracious work and our cooperation with Him; both are needed for anyone to be holy.

The Law's Relationship to Christ's Followers

Now we begin a new paragraph (in the NASB). It is a pivotal section of enormous importance, an introduction to much of what Christ will say in the remainder of His sermon.

Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you that unless your

righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:17-20).

If Jesus warned His audience against thinking that He was abolishing the Law or the Prophets, then we can safely conclude that at least some in His audience were making that assumption. Why they were making such an assumption we can only guess. *Perhaps* it was Jesus' stern rebukes of the legalistic scribes and Pharisees that tempted some to think He was abolishing the Law and Prophets.

Regardless, Jesus clearly wanted His disciples to realize the error of such an assumption. He was the divine inspirer of the entire Old Testament, so certainly He was not going to abolish everything He'd said through Moses and the Prophets. On the contrary, He would, as He said, *fulfill* the Law and Prophets.

Exactly how would He fulfill the Law and Prophets? Some think that Jesus was talking only about fulfilling the messianic predictions. Although Jesus certainly did (or will yet) fulfill every messianic prediction, that is not entirely what He had in mind. Clearly, the context indicates He was also talking about *all* that was written in the Law and Prophets, down to "smallest letter or stroke" (v. 18) of the Law, and to the "least of" (v. 19) the commandments.

Others suppose Jesus meant that He would fulfill the Law by fulfilling its requirements on our behalf through His obedient life and sacrificial death (see Rom. 8:4). But that, as the context also reveals, is not what He had in mind. In the verses that follow, Jesus mentioned nothing about His life or death as being a reference point for the fulfilling of the Law. Rather, in the very next sentence, He stated that the Law would be relevant at least until "heaven and earth pass away" and "all is accomplished," reference points far after His death on the cross. He then declared that people's attitudes toward the Law would even affect their status in heaven (v. 19), and that people must obey the Law even better than the scribes or Pharisees or they will not enter heaven (v. 20).

Obviously, besides just fulfilling the messianic prophecies, types, and shadows of the Law, as well as fulfilling the requirements of the Law on our behalf, Jesus was also thinking about His audience *keeping* the commandments of the Law and *doing* what the Prophets said. In one sense, Jesus would fulfill the Law by revealing God's true and original intent in it, fully endorsing and explaining it, and completing what was lacking in His audience's understanding of it.² The Greek word translated *fulfill* in verse 17 is also translated in the New Testament as *complete, finish, fill, and fully carry out*. That is exactly what Jesus was about to do, beginning just four sentences later.

No, Jesus did not come to abolish the Law and Prophets, but to fulfill them, that is, "fill them to the full." When I teach this portion of the Sermon on the Mount, I often show everyone a half-full glass of water to serve as an example of the revelation God gave in the Law and Prophets. Jesus did not come to abolish the Law and Prophets (as I say this, I act as though I'm going to throw the half-full glass away). Rather, He would *fulfill* the Law and Prophets (at which time I take a bottle of water and fill the glass to the brim). That helps people understand what Jesus meant.

² This would be true of what is often referred to as the "ceremonial aspects of the Law" as well as the "moral aspects of the Law," although much of His fuller explanation concerning His fulfilling the ceremonial law would be given by His Holy Spirit to the apostles after His resurrection. We now understand why there is no need to sacrifice animals under the new covenant, because Jesus was the Lamb of God. Neither do we follow the old covenant dietary laws because Jesus declared all foods to be clean (see Mark 7:19). We don't need the intercession of an earthly high priest because Jesus is now our High Priest, and so on. Unlike the ceremonial law, however, no part of the moral law was ever altered by anything Jesus did or said, before or after His death and resurrection. Rather, Jesus expounded upon and endorsed God's moral law, as did the apostles by the inspiration of the Spirit after His resurrection. The moral aspects of the Mosaic Law are all included in the law of Christ, the law of the new covenant. Keep in mind also that Jesus was speaking that day to Jews under the Mosaic Law. Thus His words in Matt. 5:17-20 need to be interpreted in light of His ongoing revelation found in the New Testament.

The Importance of Keeping the Law

Concerning the keeping of the commandments found in the Law and Prophets, Jesus couldn't have made His point more forcefully. He expected His disciples to obey them. They were as important as ever. In fact, how they esteemed the commandments would determine their status in heaven: "Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (5:19).

Then we come to verse 20: "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven."

Notice that this is not a new thought, but a concluding statement that is connected with previous verses by the conjunction *for*. How important is keeping the commandments? *One must keep them better than the scribes and Pharisees in order to enter the kingdom of heaven.* Again we see Jesus was keeping with His theme—*Only the holy will inherit God's kingdom.*

Lest he contradict Christ, the disciple-making minister would never assure anyone of possessing salvation whose righteousness did not surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees.

Of What Kind of Righteousness Was Jesus Speaking?

When Jesus stated that our righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees, was He not alluding to the legal standing of righteousness that would be imputed to us as a free gift? No, He was not, and for good reason. First, the context does not fit this interpretation. Before and after this statement (and throughout the entire Sermon on the Mount), Jesus was talking about keeping the commandments, that is, living righteously. The most natural interpretation of His words is that we must *live* more righteously than the scribes and Pharisees. And how absurd it would be to think that Jesus was holding the scribes and Pharisees to a standard to which He was not holding His own disciples. How foolish to think that Jesus would condemn the scribes and Pharisees for committing sins for which He would not also condemn His disciples simply because they had prayed a "salvation prayer."³

Our problem is that we don't want to accept the obvious meaning of the verse, because it sounds to us like legalism. But our real problem is that we don't understand the inseparable correlation between imputed righteousness and practical righteousness. The apostle John did, however. He wrote: "Little children, let no one deceive you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous" (1 John 3:7). Nor do we understand the correlation between the new birth and practical righteousness as John also did: "Everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him" (1 John 2:29).

Jesus could have added to His statement of 5:20, "And if you repent, are truly born again, and receive through a living faith My free gift of righteousness, your practical righteousness will indeed exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees as you cooperate with the power of My indwelling Spirit."

How to be Holier than the Scribes and Pharisees

The question that would naturally come to mind in response to Jesus' statement in 5:20 is this: How righteous, exactly, were the scribes and Pharisees? The answer is: *Not very.*

At another time, Jesus referred to them as "whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness" (Matt. 23:27). That is, they appeared outwardly righteous, but were inwardly evil. They did a great job at keeping the *letter* of the Law, but ignored the *spirit* of it, often justifying

³ Moreover, if Jesus was talking about the imputed, legal righteousness that we receive as a gift for believing in Him, why didn't He at least hint at it? Why did He say something that would be so easily misunderstood by the uneducated people to whom He was speaking, who would never have guessed that He was talking about imputed righteousness?

themselves by twisting or even altering God's commandments.

This intrinsic flaw in the scribes and Pharisees was, in fact, Jesus' major focus in much of what remains in the Sermon on the Mount. We find that He quoted a number of God's well-known commandments, and after each quotation, revealed the difference between keeping the letter and spirit of each law. In so doing, He repeatedly exposed the false teaching and hypocrisy of the Scribes and Pharisees, and He revealed His true expectations for His disciples.

Jesus began each example with the words, "You have heard." He was speaking to people who had probably never read, but only heard the Old Testament scrolls read by the scribes and Pharisees in the synagogues. It could well be said that His audience had been sitting under false teaching all their lives, as they heard the scribes' and Pharisees' twisted commentary on God's Word and observed their unholy lifestyles.

Love Each Other, Unlike the Scribes and Pharisees

By using the sixth commandment as His first reference point, Jesus began teaching His disciples God's expectations for them, while at the same time exposing the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees.

You have heard that the ancients were told, "You shall not commit murder" and "Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court." But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever shall say to his brother, "Raca," shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever shall say, "You fool," shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell (Matt. 5:21-22).

First, note that Jesus was warning about something that could cause a person to go to hell. That was His primary theme—*Only the holy will inherit God's kingdom.*

The scribes and Pharisees preached against murder, citing the sixth commandment, apparently warning that murder could land one in court.

Jesus, however, wanted his disciples to know what the scribes and Pharisees didn't seem to realize—there were much "lesser" infractions that could land one in court, apparently God's court. Because it is so important that we love one another (the second greatest commandment), when we become angry with a brother we should already consider ourselves found guilty in God's court. If we verbalize our anger by speaking in an unkind way to him, our infraction is even more serious, and we should consider ourselves guilty in God's highest court. And if we go beyond that, spewing out hatred for a brother with a second slur, we are guilty enough before God to be cast into hell!⁴ That is serious!

Our relationship with God is gauged by our relationship with our brothers. If we hate a brother, that reveals that we do not possess eternal life. John wrote,

Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him (1 John 3:15).

If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen (1 John 4:20).

How important it is that we love each other and, as Jesus commanded, work for reconciliation when we are offended by one another (see Matt. 18:15-17).

Jesus continued:

⁴ This applies to our relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus called certain religious leaders *fools* (see Matt. 23:17), as does Scripture in general (see Prov. 1:7; 13:20).

If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering (Matt. 5:23-24).

This is to say that if our relationship with our brother is not right, then our relationship with God is not right. The Pharisees were guilty of majoring on what was of minor importance and minimizing what was of major importance, “straining out the gnat and swallowing the camel” as Jesus said (Matt. 23:23-24). They stressed the importance of tithing and giving offerings, but neglected what was *much* more important, the second greatest commandment, to love one another. How hypocritical it is to bring an offering, supposedly to show one’s love for God, while violating His second most important commandment! This is what Jesus was warning against.

Still on the subject of the strictness of God’s court, Jesus continued:

Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, in order that your opponent may not deliver you to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Truly I say to you, you shall not come out of there, until you have paid up the last cent (Matt. 5:25-26).

It is best to stay out of God’s courtroom altogether by living at peace with our brothers as much as is possible. If a brother or sister is angry with us and we stubbornly refuse to work for reconciliation “on the way to court,” that is, on our journey through life to stand before God, we may certainly regret it. What Jesus said here is very similar to His warning regarding any imitation of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:23-35. The servant who was forgiven but who refused to forgive had his debt reinstated, and he was handed over to the torturers “until he should repay all that was owed” (Matt. 18:34). Here Jesus is likewise warning of the dire eternal consequences of not loving our brother as God expects.

Be Sexually Pure, Unlike the Scribes and Pharisees

The seventh commandment was the subject of Jesus’ second example of how the scribes and Pharisees kept the letter while neglecting the spirit of the Law. Jesus expected His disciples to be more sexually pure than the scribes and Pharisees.

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery”; but I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart. And if your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to go into hell (Matt. 5:27-30).

Note *again* that Jesus was keeping with His primary theme—*Only the holy will inherit God’s kingdom*. He warned again about hell and what one must do to stay out of it.

The scribes and Pharisees couldn’t ignore the seventh commandment, so they outwardly obeyed it, remaining faithful to their wives. Yet they fantasized about making love to other women. They would mentally undress women they watched in the marketplace. They were adulterers at heart, and thus were transgressing the spirit of the seventh commandment. How many in the church today are no different?

God, of course, intended for people to be completely sexually pure. Obviously, if it is wrong to have a sexual relationship with your neighbor’s wife, it is also wrong to meditate

on having a sexual relationship with her. Jesus was not adding a stricter law to what was already required by the Law of Moses. The tenth commandment clearly contained a prohibition against lust: "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife" (Ex. 20:17).

Were any among Jesus' audience convicted? Probably they were. What should they have done? They should have immediately repented as Jesus instructed. Whatever it took, no matter what the cost, those who were lustful should stop lusting, because those who practice lust go to hell.

Of course, no reasonable person thinks Jesus meant that lustful people should literally pluck out an eye or cut off a hand. A lustful person who cuts out his eye simply becomes a one-eyed luster! Jesus was dramatically and solemnly emphasizing the importance of obeying the spirit of the seventh commandment. Eternity depended on it.

Following Christ's example, the disciple-making minister will admonish his disciples to "cut off" whatever it is that is causing them to stumble. If it's cable TV, the cable needs to be disconnected. If it's regular TV, the TV needs to be removed. If it's a magazine subscription, it should be canceled. If it's the Internet, it should be disconnected. If it is an open window, the shutters should be closed. None of those things are worth spending eternity in hell over, and because the disciple-making minister truly loves His flock, he will tell them the truth and warn them, just as Jesus did.

Another Way to Commit Adultery

Jesus' next example is very much related to the one that we just considered, which is probably why it is mentioned next. It should be considered a further elaboration rather than a new subject. The subject is, "Another thing Pharisees do that is equivalent to adultery."

And it was said, "Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce"; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery (Matt. 5:31-32).

Here is an example of how the scribes and Pharisees twisted God's law to accommodate their sinful lifestyles.

Let's create an imaginary Pharisee in Jesus' day. Across the street from him lives an attractive woman after whom he is lusting. He flirts with her when he sees her each day. She seems attracted to him, and his desire for her grows. He would love to see her unclothed, and imagines her regularly in his sexual fantasies. Oh, if he could only have her!

But he has a problem. He is married, and his religion forbids adultery. He doesn't want to break the seventh commandment (even though he's already broken it every time he's lusted). What can he do?

There *is* a solution! If he were divorced from his present spouse, he could marry the mistress of his mind! But is it lawful to get a divorce? A fellow Pharisee tells him *Yes!* There is a scripture for it! Deuteronomy 24:1 says something about giving your wife a divorce certificate when you divorce her. Divorce *must* be lawful under certain circumstances! But what are those circumstances? He reads closely what God said:

When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house... (Deut. 24:1).

Ahah! He *can* divorce his wife if he finds some indecency in her! And he has! She's not as attractive as the woman across the street! (This is not a far-fetched example. According to Rabbi Hillel, who had the most popular teaching regarding divorce in Jesus' day, a man

could lawfully divorce his wife if he found someone who was more attractive, because that made his current wife “indecent” in his eyes. Rabbi Hillel also taught a man could divorce his wife if she put too much salt on his food, or spoke to another man, or didn’t produce a son for him.)

So our lustful Pharisee lawfully divorces his wife by giving her the required certificate and quickly marries the woman of his fantasies. And all without incurring an ounce of guilt because God’s Law has been obeyed!

A Different View

Of course, God sees things differently. He never stipulated what the “indecent” mentioned in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 actually was, or if it was even a legitimate reason to divorce. In fact, that passage says nothing in regard as to when divorce is lawful or not lawful. It contains only a prohibition against the twice-divorced or once-divorced/once widowed woman remarrying her first husband. To say that there must be some “indecent” in God’s eyes that makes divorce legitimate based on this passage is to force meaning into the text.

In any case, in God’s mind, the imaginary man I’ve just described is no different than an adulterer. He has broken the seventh commandment. In fact, he’s even guiltier than the average adulterer, because he is guilty of “double adultery.” How is that? First, he’s committed adultery himself. Jesus later said, “Whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery” (Matt. 19:9).

Second, because his now-divorced wife must seek another husband to survive, in God’s mind the Pharisee has done the equivalent of forcing his wife to have sex with another man. Thus, he incurs guilt for her “adultery.”⁵ Jesus said, “Everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, *makes* her commit adultery” (Matt. 5:32, emphasis added).

Jesus may even have been charging our lustful Pharisee with “triple adultery” if His statement, “and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (Matt. 5:32), means that God holds the Pharisee accountable for the “adultery” of his former wife’s new husband.⁶

This was a hot issue in Jesus’ day, as we read in another place where some Pharisees questioned Him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?” (Matt. 19:3). Their question reveals their hearts. Obviously, at least some of them wanted to believe divorce was lawful for any cause.

I must also add what a shame it is when Christians take these same scriptures about divorce, misinterpret them, and place heavy shackles on God’s children. Jesus was not talking about the Christian who was divorced when he or she was unsaved, and who, upon finding a wonderful potential mate who also loves Christ, marries that person. That is not equivalent to adultery. If that is what Jesus meant, we’ll have to change the gospel, because no longer does it provide forgiveness for all the sins of sinners. From now on we’ll have to preach, “Jesus died for you, and if you repent and believe in Him, you can have all your sins forgiven. If you’ve been divorced, however, make sure you never get remarried or else you’ll be living in adultery, and the Bible says that adulterers will go to hell. Also, if you’ve been divorced *and* remarried, before you come to Christ you need to commit one

⁵ Of course, God doesn’t hold her accountable for adultery when she remarries; she was just the victim of her husband’s sin. Obviously, Jesus’ words make no sense unless she does remarry. Otherwise, there is no sense in which she could be considered to be an adulteress.

⁶ Again, God would not hold the new husband accountable for adultery. He’s doing a virtuous thing, marrying and providing for a divorced woman. However, if a man encouraged a woman to divorce her husband so he could marry her, then he would be guilty of adultery, and that is perhaps the sin Jesus had in mind here.

more sin and divorce your present spouse. Otherwise you'll continue to live in adultery, and adulterers aren't saved."⁷ Is that the gospel?⁸

Be Honest, Unlike the Scribes and Pharisees

Jesus' third example of the unrighteous conduct and scriptural misapplication of the scribes and Pharisees is related to God's commandment to tell the truth. The scribes and Pharisees had developed a very creative way to lie. We learn from Matthew 23:16-22 that they did not consider themselves obligated to keep their vows if they swore by the temple, the altar, or heaven. However, if they swore by the *gold* in the temple, the *offering* on the altar, or by *God* in heaven, they *were* obligated to keep their vow! It was an adult equivalent of a child thinking he is exempt from having to tell the truth as long as his fingers are crossed behind his back. Jesus expects His disciples to tell the truth.

Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, "You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord." But I say to you, make no oath at all, 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. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be, "Yes, yes" or "No, no"; and anything beyond these is of evil (Matt. 5:33-37).

God's original commandment concerning vows said nothing about making an oath by swearing on something else. God intended for His people to speak the truth at all times, so there would be no need to swear, ever.

There is nothing wrong with making an oath, because an oath is nothing more than a vow or promise. In fact, oaths to obey God are very good. Salvation begins with an oath to follow Jesus. But when people have to swear by something to convince others to believe them, *it is an outright admission that they normally lie*. People who always tell the truth do not need to swear, ever. Yet many churches today are full of liars, and the ministers are often the leaders in deceptiveness and guile.

The disciple-making minister sets an example of truthfulness and teaches his disciples to tell the truth always. He knows John warned that all liars will be cast into the lake that burns with fire and brimstone (see Rev. 21:8).

Don't Take Revenge, as do the Scribes and Pharisees

The next item on Jesus' list of grievances was a Pharisaic perversion of a very well-known verse in the Old Testament. We have already considered this passage in the chapter about biblical interpretation.

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone wants to sue you, and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. And whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you" (Matt. 5:38-42).

The Law of Moses declared that when a person was found guilty in court of injuring another person, his punishment should be equivalent to the harm he caused. If he knocked

⁷ There are, of course, other situations that could be addressed. For example, the Christian woman whose unsaved husband divorces her is certainly not guilty of adultery if she remarries a Christian man.

⁸ In a later chapter about divorce and remarriage, I address this issue more thoroughly.

out someone's tooth, in fairness and justice, his tooth should be knocked out. This commandment was given to insure that justice would be served in court cases for major offenses. God instituted a system of courts and judges under the Law to deter crime, insure justice, and curb revenge. And God commanded judges to be impartial and just in their judgments. They were to mete out "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But that phrase and commandment are always found in passages regarding justice in courts.

Once again, however, the scribes and Pharisees had twisted the commandment, turning it into a commandment that made obtaining personal revenge a holy obligation. Apparently, they had adopted a "zero tolerance" policy, seeking revenge for even the smallest offenses.

God, however, has always expected more from His people. Revenge is something He expressly forbade (see Deut. 32:35). The Old Testament taught that God's people should show kindness to their enemies (see Ex. 23:4-5; Prov. 25:21-22). Jesus endorsed this truth by telling His disciples to turn the other cheek and go the extra mile when dealing with evil people. When we are wronged, God wants us to be merciful, returning good for evil.

But does Jesus expect us to allow people to take gross advantage of us, allowing them to ruin our lives if they desire? Is it wrong to take a nonbeliever to court, seeking justice for an illegal act committed against us? No. Jesus was not talking about obtaining due justice for major offenses in court, but about getting personal revenge for petty infractions. Notice that Jesus did not say that we should offer our neck for strangling to someone who has just stabbed us in the back. He didn't say we should give someone our house when he demands our car. Jesus was simply telling us to show tolerance and mercy to a high degree when we daily encounter petty offenses and the normal challenges of dealing with selfish people. He wants us to be kinder than selfish people expect. To that standard, the scribes and Pharisees didn't come close.

Why are so many professing Christians so easily offended? Why are they so quickly upset by offenses that are ten times smaller than being slapped on the cheek? Are these people saved? The disciple-making minister sets an example of turning the other cheek, and he teaches his disciples to do the same.

Don't Hate Your Enemies, as do the Scribes and Pharisees

Finally, Jesus listed one more God-given commandment that the scribes and Pharisees had altered to accommodate their hateful hearts.

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy." But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:43-48).

In the Old Testament, God had said, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18), but the scribes and Pharisees had conveniently defined neighbors as being only those people who loved them. Everyone else was an enemy, and since God said to love only our neighbors, it must be proper to hate our enemies. According to Jesus, however, that is not at all what God intended.

Jesus would later teach in the story of the Good Samaritan that we should consider *every*

person to be our neighbor.⁹ God wants us to love *everyone*, including our enemies. That is God's standard for His children, a standard by which He Himself lives. He sends crop-growing sun and rain, not only on good people, but also on evil people. We should follow His example, showing kindness to undeserving people. When we do, it shows that we are "sons of [our] Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:45). Authentic born-again people act like their Father.

The love God expects us to show our enemies is not an emotion or an approval of their wickedness. God is not requiring us to foster warm feelings about those who oppose us. He is not telling us to say what is untrue, that our enemies are really wonderful people. But He does expect that we will be merciful towards them and take willful action to that end, at least by greeting them and praying for them.

Notice that Jesus once more reinforced His primary theme—*Only the holy will inherit God's kingdom*. He told His disciples that if they loved only those who loved them, they were no better than pagan Gentiles and tax collectors, two kinds of people whom every Jew would have agreed were hell-bound. It was another way of saying that people who only love those who love them are going to hell.

Do Good for the Right Motives, Unlike the Scribes and Pharisees

Not only does Jesus expect His followers to be holy, He expects them to be holy for the right reasons. It is quite possible to obey God's commandments and still be very displeasing to Him if one's obedience stems from a wrong motive. Jesus condemned the scribes and Pharisees because they did all their good deeds purely to impress others (see Matt. 23:5). He expects His disciples to be different.

Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. When therefore you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets [Jesus' audience knew of whom He was speaking], that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you (Matt. 6:1-4).

Jesus expected that His followers would give alms to the poor. The Law commanded it (see Ex. 23:11; Lev. 19:10; 23:22; 25:35; Deut. 15:7-11), but the scribes and Pharisees did it with the blowing of trumpets, ostensibly to call the poor to their generous public distributions. Yet how many professing Christians give *nothing* to the poor? They haven't even made it to the point of needing to examine their motives for alms giving. If selfishness motivated the scribes and Pharisees to advertise their alms giving, what is it that motivates professing Christians to *ignore* the plight of the poor? In this regard, does their righteousness surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees?

As Paul would echo in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15, we can do good things for the wrong reasons. If our motives are not pure, our good deeds will go unrewarded. Paul wrote that it is possible even to preach the gospel from impure motives (see Phil. 1:15-17). As Jesus prescribed, a good way to be sure our giving is purely motivated is to give as secretively as possible, not letting our left hand know what our right hand is doing. The disciple-making minister teaches his disciples to give to the poor (providing they have the means), and he quietly practices what he preaches.

⁹ It was a Jewish teacher of the Law who, wishing to justify himself, asked Jesus the question, "Who is my neighbor?" You can be sure he already thought he had the right answer. Jesus answered him with the story of a Samaritan, a member of a race that was hated by the Jews, who proved himself to be a neighbor to a mistreated Jew (see Luke 10:25-37).

Prayer and Fasting for the Right Reasons

Jesus also expected that His followers would pray and fast, and that they would do those things, not to be seen by people, but to please their Father. Otherwise they would be no different than the hell-bound scribes and Pharisees, who prayed and fasted only to gain the praise of people, a very temporary reward. Jesus admonished His followers:

And when you pray, you are not to be as the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners, in order to be seen by men [Jesus' audience certainly knew of whom He was speaking]. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

And whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men [Again, Jesus' audience certainly knew of whom He was speaking]. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face, so that you may not be seen fasting by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you (Matt. 6:5-6, 16-18).

How many professing Christians have a prayer life that is non-existent and have never fasted?¹⁰ In this regard, how does their righteousness compare with that of the scribes and Pharisees, who practiced both (albeit for the wrong reasons)?

A Digression Regarding Prayer and Forgiveness

While on the subject of prayer, Jesus digressed a little to offer more specific instructions to His disciples regarding how they should pray. Jesus wants us to pray in such a way that we don't insult His Father by denying, through our prayers, what He has revealed about Himself. For example, since God knows what we need before we ask Him (He knows everything), there is no reason to use meaningless repetition when we pray:

And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition, as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need, before you ask Him (Matt. 6:7-8).

Truly, our prayers reveal how well we know God. Those who know Him as He is revealed in His Word pray to the end that *His* will be done and that *He* be glorified. Their highest desire is to be holy, fully pleasing to Him. This is reflected in Jesus' model prayer, what we call the Lord's Prayer, included next in Jesus' instructions to His disciples. It reveals His expectations for our priorities and devotion.¹¹

Pray, then, in this way: "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread" (Matt. 6:9-11).

The foremost concern of Christ's disciples should be that God's name be hallowed, that

¹⁰ Later in this book, I have included an entire chapter on the subject of fasting.

¹¹ Some unfortunately claim that this is not a prayer that Christians should employ because it is not prayed "in Jesus' name." Applying this logic, however, we would have to conclude that many prayers of the apostles recorded in the book of Acts and epistles were not "Christian prayers."

it be respected, revered, and treated as holy.

Of course, those who pray that God's name be hallowed should be holy themselves, hallowing God's name. It would be hypocritical to do otherwise. Thus this prayer reflects our desire that others would submit themselves to God as we have.

The second request of the model prayer is similar: "Thy kingdom come." The idea of a kingdom implies that there is a King who rules His kingdom. The Christian disciple longs to see his King, the one who rules his life, rule over the whole earth. Oh, that everyone would bow his knee to King Jesus in obedient faith!

The third request echoes the first and second: "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Again, how can we sincerely pray such a prayer without being submitted to God's will in our own lives? The true disciple desires that God's will be done on earth just as it is in heaven—perfectly and completely.

That God's name be hallowed, that His will be done, that His kingdom would come, should be more important to us than having sustaining food, our "daily bread." This fourth request is placed fourth for a reason. Even in itself, it reflects a right ordering of our priorities, and no hint of greed is found here. Christ's disciples serve God and not mammon. They aren't focused on laying up earthly treasures.

May I also add that this fourth request seems to indicate that this model prayer is one that should be prayed daily, at the beginning of each day.

The Model Prayer Continues

Do Christ's disciples ever sin? Apparently sometimes they do, since Jesus taught them to ask for forgiveness for their sins.

"And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen." For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions (Matt. 6:12-15).

Jesus' disciples realize that their disobedience offends God, and when they sin, they feel ashamed. They want the stain to be removed, and thankfully their gracious heavenly Father is willing to forgive them. But they must ask for forgiveness, the fifth request found in the Lord's Prayer.

Their being forgiven, however, is conditional upon their forgiving others. Because they've been forgiven of so much, they have an obligation to forgive everyone who requests their forgiveness (and to love and work for reconciliation with those who don't). If they refuse to forgive, God won't forgive them.

The sixth and final request, too, is one that obviously reflects the true disciple's desire to be holy: "Do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil [or 'the evil one']." So much does the true disciple long for holiness that he asks God not to lead him into a situation where he might be tempted, lest he succumb. Additionally, he requests that God would rescue him from any evil that might entrap him. Certainly this is a great prayer to pray at the beginning of each day, before we journey out into a world of evil and temptation. And certainly we can expect God to answer this prayer that He told us to pray!

Those who know God understand why all six requests of this prayer are so appropriate. The reason is revealed in the final line of the prayer: "For [or *because*] Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever" (Matt. 6:13). God is a great King who rules over His kingdom in which we are His servants. He is all-powerful, and no one should dare resist His will. All glory will belong to Him forever. He is worthy to be obeyed.

What is the dominant theme of the Lord's prayer? *Holiness*. Christ's disciples desire that God's name be hallowed, that His reign would be established over the earth, and that His

will be done perfectly everywhere. This is more important to them than even their daily bread. They want to be pleasing in His sight, and when they fail, they want forgiveness from Him. As forgiven people, they extend forgiveness to others. They long to be perfectly holy, to the degree that they desire to avoid temptation, because temptation increases their chances of sinning. The disciple-maker teaches these things to his disciples.

The Disciple and His Material Possessions

The next topic of the Sermon on the Mount is potentially very disturbing for professing Christians whose primary motivation in life is the ever-increasing accumulation of material things:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. The lamp of the body is the eye; if therefore your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon (Matt. 6:19-24).

Jesus commanded that we not lay up for ourselves treasures on earth. What then constitutes a “treasure”? Literal treasures are normally kept in treasure chests, stored away somewhere, never used for anything practical. Jesus defined them as things that attract moths, rust and thieves. Another way of saying it would be, “non-essentials.” Moths eat what is in the far ends of our closets, not what we wear frequently. Rust eats away at those things we rarely use. In more developed countries, thieves most often steal things people really don’t need: art, jewelry, expensive gadgets, and what can be pawned.

True disciples have “given up all their possessions” (see Luke 14:33). They are simply stewards of God’s money, so every decision to spend money is a spiritual decision. What we do with our money reflects who is controlling our lives. When we accumulate “treasures,” hoarding money and buying what is not essential, we reveal that Jesus is not in control, because if He were, we would do better things with the money He’s entrusted to us.

What are those better things? Jesus commands us to lay up treasure in heaven. How is that possible? He tells us in Luke’s Gospel: “Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves purses which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near, nor moth destroys” (Luke 12:33).

By giving money to help the poor and spread the gospel, we lay up treasure in heaven. Jesus is telling us to take what is sure to depreciate to the point of being worthless, and invest it in something that will never depreciate. That is what the disciple-making minister is doing, and he is teaching his disciples to do likewise.

The Bad Eye

What did Jesus mean when He spoke about people with clear eyes whose bodies are full of light and people with bad eyes whose bodies are full of darkness? His words must have something to do with money and material things, because that is what He was talking about before and after.

The Greek word translated “bad” in 6:23 is the same word translated in Matthew 20:15 as “envious.” There we read of an employer who said to his worker, “Is your eye *envious* because I am generous?” Obviously an eye cannot literally be envious. Thus the expression

“an envious (or bad) eye” speaks of a person with greedy desires. This helps us better understand what Christ meant in Matthew 6:22-23.

The person with a clear eye symbolizes the one who is pure in heart, allowing the light of the truth to come in to him. Thus he serves God and lays up treasure, not on earth, but in heaven where his heart is. The person with the bad eye shuts out the light of the truth from coming in, because he thinks he already has the truth, and thus he is full of darkness, believing lies. He lays up treasure on earth where his heart is. He believes that the purpose of his life is self-gratification. Money is his god. He is not heaven-bound.

What does it mean to have money as your god? It means that money has a place in your life that only God should rightfully have. Money is directing your life. It consumes your energy, thoughts and time. It is the main source of your joy. You love it.¹² That is why Paul equated greed with idolatry, stating that no greedy person will inherit God’s kingdom (see Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5-6).

Both God and money want to be masters of our lives, and Jesus said we can’t serve them both. Again we see that Jesus stayed with His primary theme—*Only the holy will inherit God’s kingdom*. He made it very clear that people who are full of darkness, whose god is money, whose heart is on the earth and who lay up earthly treasures, are not on the narrow road that leads to life.

The Covetous Poor

A preoccupation with material things is not only wrong when those things are luxury items. A person can be wrongly preoccupied with material things even when those things are basic necessities. Jesus continued:

For this reason [that is, based upon what I just said] I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single cubit to his life’s span? And why are you anxious about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory did not clothe himself like one of these. But if God so arrays the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more do so for you, O men of little faith? Do not be anxious then, saying, “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or “With what shall we clothe ourselves?” For all these things the Gentiles eagerly seek; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious for tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own (Matt. 6:25-34).

Many readers of this book will not be able to relate at all to the people Jesus was addressing. When was the last time you worried about having food, drink or clothing?

Jesus’ words certainly have application to all of us, however. If it is wrong to be preoccupied with the *essentials* of life, how much more wrong is it to be preoccupied with *nonessentials*? Jesus expects His disciples to be primarily focused on seeking two things: His kingdom and His righteousness. When a professing Christian can’t afford to tithe (an old

¹² On another occasion, Jesus made the same statement about the impossibility of serving God and mammon, and Luke tells us, “Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things, and they were scoffing at Him” (Luke 16:14). So again, here in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was clearly exposing the practice and teaching of the Pharisees.

covenant commandment I might add), but *can* afford many non-essential material things, is he living up to Christ's standard of seeking first His kingdom and righteousness? The answer is obvious.

Don't be a Fault-Finder

Jesus' next set of commandments to His followers concerns the sins of judging and faultfinding:

Do not judge lest you be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. And why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye (Matt. 7:1-5).

Although Jesus didn't directly or indirectly indict the scribes and Pharisees in this passage, they were certainly guilty of the sin under consideration; they found fault with Him!

What exactly did Jesus mean in this warning against judging others?

First, let us consider what He did not mean. He did not mean that we should not be discerning and make fundamental determinations about people's character by observing their actions. That is quite clear. Directly after this section, Jesus instructed His disciples not to cast their pearls to pigs or give what is holy to dogs (see 7:6). He was obviously speaking figuratively of certain kinds of people, referring to them as pigs and dogs, people who don't appreciate the value of the holy things, "pearls," they are being given. They are obviously unsaved people. And certainly, we must *judge* if people are pigs and dogs if we are to obey this commandment.

Moreover, Jesus shortly told His followers how to *judge* false teachers, "wolves in sheep's clothing" (see 7:15), by inspecting their fruit. Clearly, in order to obey Jesus' instructions we must observe people's lifestyles and make judgments.

Similarly, Paul told the Corinthian believers:

I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one (1 Cor. 5:11).

To obey this instruction requires that we examine people's lifestyles and make judgments about them based on what we observe.

The apostle John also told us that we can easily discern who is of God and who is of the devil. By looking at people's lifestyles, it is obvious who is saved and who is unsaved (see 1 John 3:10).

All of this being so, discerning people's character by examining their actions and judging if they belong to God or the devil is not the sin of judging against which Christ warned. So what did Jesus mean?

Notice that Jesus was talking about finding small faults, *specks*, with a *brother* (note that Jesus uses the word *brother* three times in this passage). Jesus was not warning us against judging people to be unbelievers by observing their glaring faults (as He will shortly instruct us to do in this very sermon). Rather, these are instructions for how Christians should treat Christians. They should not be finding little faults with one another, and this is especially so when they themselves are blind to their own larger faults. In such cases, they are hypocritical. As Jesus once said to a crowd of hypocritical judges, "He who is without

sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone” (John 8:7).

The apostle James, whose epistle often parallels the Sermon on the mount, similarly wrote, “Do not complain, brethren, against one another, that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door” (Jas. 5:9). Perhaps this also helps us to understand something of what Jesus was warning against—finding faults with fellow believers and then broadcasting what we’ve found, complaining against one another. This is one of the most prevalent sins in the church, and those who are guilty place themselves in a dangerous position of being judged. When we speak against a fellow believer, pointing out his faults to others, we’re violating the golden rule, because we don’t want others to speak ill of us in our absence.

We may lovingly approach a fellow believer about his or her fault, but only when we can do so without hypocrisy, certain that we are not guilty (or more guilty) of the same sin as the person we are confronting. It is, however, a complete waste of time to do so with an unbeliever, which seems to be the subject of the next verse. Jesus said,

Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces (Matt. 7:6).

Similarly, a proverb says, “Do not reprove a scoffer, lest he hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you” (Prov. 9:8). Jesus told His disciples at another time to shake the dust off their feet in protest against those who reject their gospel. Once the “dogs” have been identified by their lack of appreciation for the truth, God doesn’t want His servants wasting their time trying to reach them while others have been given no opportunity yet.

Encouragement to Pray

Finally we come to the last section of the body of Jesus’ sermon. It begins with some encouraging prayer promises:

Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened. Or what man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he shall ask for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him! (Matt. 7:7-11).

“Aha!” a reader somewhere might be saying. “Here’s a part of the Sermon on the Mount that has nothing to do with holiness.”

That all depends on what it is we’re asking, knocking and seeking for in prayer. As those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness,” we long to obey all that Jesus has commanded in His sermon, and that longing is certainly reflected in our prayers. In fact, the model prayer that Jesus previously shared in this same sermon was the expression of a desire for God’s will to be done and for holiness.

Additionally, Luke’s version of these same prayer promises under consideration ends with, “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the *Holy Spirit* to those who ask Him?” (Luke 11:13). Jesus was not thinking of luxury items when He promised us “good gifts.” In His mind, the Holy Spirit is a “good gift,” because the Holy Spirit makes us holy and helps us spread the gospel that makes other people holy. And holy people go to heaven.

Other good gifts are anything that are in within God’s will. God is obviously most concerned about His will and His kingdom, and so we should expect that our prayers for anything that increase our usefulness in God’s kingdom will always be answered.

A Summarizing Statement

Now we arrive at a verse that should be considered a statement that summarizes practically everything Jesus said up to this point. Many commentators miss this, but it is important that we don't. This particular verse is obviously a summarizing statement, as it begins with the word *therefore*. It is thus linked to previous instructions, and the question is: How much of what Jesus has said does it summarize? Let's read it and think:

Therefore, however you want people to treat you, so treat them, for this is the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 7:12).

This statement can't be a summary of just the few verses before it concerning prayer, otherwise it would make no sense.

Remember that early in His sermon, Jesus had warned against the error of thinking that He had come to abolish *the Law or the Prophets* (see Matt. 5:17). From that point in His sermon until the verse at which we've now arrived, He did essentially nothing but endorse and explain God's Old Testament commandments. Thus, He now summarizes *everything* He's commanded, all of which He derived from the Law and Prophets: "Therefore, whatever you want others to do for you, do so for them, for this is *the Law and the Prophets*" (7:12). The phrase, "the Law and the Prophets," connects everything Jesus said between Matthew 5:17 and 7:12.

Now, as Jesus begins the conclusion of His sermon, He reiterates His primary theme once more—*Only the holy inherit God's kingdom*:

Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it (Matt. 7:13-14).

Obviously the narrow gate and the way that leads to life, which few find, is symbolic of salvation. The wide gate and broad way that leads to destruction, the route of the majority, symbolizes damnation. If everything Jesus said prior to this statement means anything, if this sermon has any logical progression, if Jesus possessed any intelligence as a communicator, then the most natural interpretation would be that the narrow way is the way of following Jesus, obeying His commandments. The broad way would be the opposite. How many professing Christians are on the narrow way described in this sermon? The disciple-making minister is certainly on the narrow way, and he is leading his disciples on that same way.

It is puzzling to some professing Christians that Jesus said nothing about faith or believing in Him in this sermon in which He said so much about salvation and damnation. To those who understand the inseparable correlation between belief and behavior, however, this sermon presents no problem. People who obey Jesus show their faith by their works. Those who don't obey Him don't believe He is the Son of God. Not only is our salvation an indication of God's grace toward us, so is the transformation that has taken place in our lives. Our holiness is really His holiness.

How to Recognize False Religious Leaders

As Jesus continued His concluding remarks, He next warned His disciples about false prophets who lead the undiscerning down the broad road to destruction. They are those who are not truly of God, yet disguised as so. All false teachers and leaders fall under this category. How can they be identified?

Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles, are they? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits. Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness" (Matt. 7:15-23).

Clearly, Jesus indicated that false teachers are very deceptive. They have some exterior indications of being genuine. They may call Jesus their Lord, prophesy, cast out demons and perform miracles. But the "sheep's clothing" only hides the "ravenous wolf." They aren't of the true sheep. How can it be known if they are true or false? Their true character can be identified by examining their "fruits."

What are the fruits of which Jesus was speaking? Obviously, they are not fruits of miracles. Rather, they are the fruits of obedience to all Jesus taught. Those who are true sheep do the will of the Father. Those who are false "practice lawlessness" (7:23). Our responsibility, then, is to compare their lives with what Jesus taught and commanded.

False teachers abound today in the church, and we should not be surprised, because both Jesus and Paul forewarned us that, as the end approaches, we should expect nothing less (see Matt. 24:11; 2 Tim. 4:3-4). The most prevalent false prophets of our day are those who teach that heaven awaits the unholy. They are responsible for the eternal damnation of millions of people. Of them, John Wesley wrote,

How terrible is this!—when the ambassadors of God turn agents for the devil!—when they who are commissioned to teach men the way to heaven do in fact teach them the way to hell....If it be asked, "Why, who ever did...this?" ...I answer, Ten thousand wise and honourable men; even all those, of whatever denomination, who encourage the proud, the trifler, the passionate, the lover of the world, the man of pleasure, the unjust or unkind, the easy, careless, harmless, useless creatures, the man who suffers no reproach for righteousness' sake, to imagine he is in the way to heaven. These are false prophets in the highest sense of the word. These are traitors both to God and man....They are continually peopling the realms of the night; and whenever they follow the poor souls they have destroyed, "hell shall be moved from beneath to meet them at their coming!"¹³

Interestingly, Wesley was specifically commenting about the false teachers whom Jesus warned against in Matthew 7:15-23.

Notice that Jesus again plainly said, contrary to what so many false teachers tell us today, that those who don't bear good fruit will be cast into hell (see 7:19). Moreover, this applies not just to teachers and prophets, but to everyone. Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21). What is true for prophets is true for all. This is Jesus' main theme—*Only the holy will inherit God's kingdom*. People who aren't obeying Jesus are destined for hell.

Also notice the connection Jesus made between what a person is inwardly and what he is outwardly. "Good" trees produce good fruit. "Bad" trees *can't* produce good fruit. The

¹³ *The Works of John Wesley* (Baker: Grand Rapids, 1996), by John Wesley, reprinted from the 1872 edition issued by the Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, London, pp. 441, 416.

source of the good fruit that shows up on the outside is the nature of the person. By His grace, God has changed the nature of those who have truly believed in Jesus.¹⁴

A Final Warning and Summary

Jesus concluded His sermon with a final warning and summarizing example. As you would expect, it is an illustration of His theme—*Only the holy will inherit God's kingdom.*

Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them [literally, “does them”], may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded upon the rock. And everyone who hears these words of Mine, and does not act upon them [literally, “does not do them”], will be like a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and it fell, and great was its fall (Matt. 7:24-27).

Jesus' final illustration is not a formula for “success in life” as some use it. The context shows that He was not giving advice on how to prosper financially during tough times by having faith in His promises. This is the summary of all that Jesus had said in His Sermon on the Mount. Those who do what He says are wise and will endure; they need not fear the wrath of God when it falls. Those who don't obey Him are foolish and will suffer greatly, paying “the penalty of eternal destruction” (2 Thes. 1:9).

Answer to an Question

Is it not possible that Jesus' Sermon on the Mount was only applicable to those followers of His who lived prior to His sacrificial death and resurrection? Were they not under the Law as their temporary means of salvation, but after Jesus died for their sins, were then saved by faith, thus invalidating the theme expounded in this sermon?

This theory is a bad one. No one has ever been saved by his works. It has always been by faith, prior to and during the old covenant. Paul argues in Romans 4 that both Abraham (before the old covenant) and David (during the old covenant) were justified by faith and not works.

Moreover, it was an impossibility that any of Jesus' audience could be saved by works, because they had all sinned and fallen short of God's glory (see Rom. 3:23). Only God's grace could save them, and only faith could receive His grace.

Unfortunately, too many in the church today view Jesus' commandments as serving no higher purpose than to make us feel guilty so we'll see the impossibility of earning salvation by works. Now that we've “gotten the message” and have been saved by faith, we can ignore most of His commandments. Unless, of course, we want to get others “saved.” Then we can pull out the commandments again to show people how sinful they are so they will be saved by a “faith” that is void of works.

Nevertheless, Jesus did not tell His disciples, “Go into all the world and make disciples, and make sure they realize that, once they've felt guilty and are then saved by faith, My commandments have served their purpose in their lives.” Rather, He said, “Go therefore

¹⁴ I can't resist taking the opportunity also to comment here about a common expression people use when trying to excuse sins in others: “We don't know what is in their hearts.” In contradiction to this, Jesus said here that the outside reveals the inside. In another place, He said, “The mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart” (Matt. 12:34). When a person speaks words of hate, it indicates hatred fills his heart. Jesus also told us that “from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness” (Mark 7:21-22). When a person commits adultery, we *do* know what is in his heart: adultery.

and make disciples of all the nations...*teaching them to observe all that I commanded you*"
(Matt. 28:19-20, emphasis added). Disciple-making ministers are doing just that.