

“According to Matthew”

A study of the Gospel of Matthew
Part 7: Mountain Top Case Studies

In our last session we looked at the principles outlined in the first part of the Sermon on the Mount. Following the standards we know as ‘The Beatitudes’ (from the Latin, ‘beatitudo’ meaning *happiness* or *blessedness*) come a series of Case Studies on how they apply in given situations.

Before we get to that teaching the disciples are offered some encouragement, related to salt and light.

Read 13-16.

¹³ "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. ¹⁴ "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Jesus is preparing His disciples for a worldwide mission to transform the world. The scope of the work was enormous. They couldn’t help but be overwhelmed by the size of the task. They are offered two illustrations of small things that made a big difference. Firstly, salt. Salt was used to not only to preserve foods but also to add flavor. A little went a long way. Likewise a little bit of light could dispel a whole lot of darkness. They are encouraged to do the little things in order that a greater good, that of people being drawn into the worship of God, might be accomplished.

Christian life is mostly about doing the little things. Not many of us are called to great tasks that change the course of history in one swift action. We are all called to stick at the daily task of doing the next loving thing that we can. Such is the nature of being salt and light.

Two Contemporary Christian performers from back in the days when there was no such thing as Contemporary Christian Music (just guys with acoustic guitars who used to do free gigs in local coffee bars and youth clubs) there was a duo known as Ishmael and Andy who had a song called the ‘Jesus Christ Salt and Light Company’

*“C’mon Christians and pull yourselves together,
Wake up because it’s time we allowed everyone to see,
That the God whom we portray,
Stops this world from running away
‘Cos we’re members of the ‘Jesus Christ Salt and Light Company’ ”*

'Take pride', they would say, 'In your position as a shareholder in the 'Jesus Christ Salt and Light Company'. Let everybody know what a great company this is!

Before we are given some examples of how His teaching worked out in practice, Jesus wants to assure His listeners that His teaching was not to replace anything that had come before it, but was rather the fulfillment of all that the laws and prophets had promised.

Read 17-20

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

The injunction to have righteousness that surpassed that of Scribes and Pharisee was not an invitation to consider themselves as better than them, but rather an indication that what Jesus was offering them was a higher way, that gave meaning to the law and the incentive to fulfill it.

For the Pharisees religion was a matter of obeying the law to gain God's good favor. For the disciples the only righteousness they could claim was that of Christ Himself, and religion was thus a matter of response to God's grace.

You will notice in the Case Studies that after demonstrating how the law is rightly to be explained, Jesus shifts the focus of attention from the behavior that the law dealt with to inner intents and motives. He pictures the Kingdom as working in the lives of people to change their values and behavior from the inside.

Earlier in Matthew we went down to the Jordan and heard John the Baptist proclaim, "I baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit". The prophet Jeremiah had prophesied that there would come a time when God would write His law upon people's hearts. Later in the New Testament this became identified as being the work of God's Holy Spirit, the Spirit who brings inner conviction and the power to change. In the Kingdom which Jesus proclaims any outward conformity without an inward commitment is unthinkable.

It is interesting to read verses 21 through 49 as though they were a sermon. There is a definite rhythm and flow to the narrative. Each section begins with "You have heard it said ..." followed by "But I tell you..." A course of action is then suggested and often

the reason for taking that action. Some of the imagery and actions suggested are startling and seem extreme! But, as we said in our last session, maybe that shouldn't surprise us as this is a mountain-top/cutting edge proclamation!

This idea of principles followed by examples is similar to that found in the Book of Exodus following Moses delivering the 10 commandments. The 10 commandments themselves take up only a few verses. Examples as to how the commandments apply take up many of the chapters following!

Let us try and transport our selves to the mountainside and imagine ourselves listening to the words of Rabbi Jesus as He preaches to a curious group of eager listeners.

²¹ "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'

²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca, ' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

²³ "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you,

²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

²⁵ "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison.

²⁶ I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.'

²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

³¹ "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.'

³² But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

³³ "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.'

³⁴ But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne;

³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King.

³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.

³⁷ Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'

³⁹ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

⁴⁰ And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.

⁴¹ If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.

⁴² Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³ **"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'**

⁴⁴ **But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,**

⁴⁵ **that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.**

⁴⁶ **If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?**

⁴⁷ **And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?**

⁴⁸ **Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**

Each of the sections can of course be thoroughly expounded upon and could form the basis of a sermon series or bible study all of their own, so for now let us try and hit the headlines.

What about murder? Jesus locates the root of murder in anger and hatred. Rather than nurse anger, which may lead to murder, the Kingdom citizen is to value peacemaking. They are to take the initiative in befriending the one who has offended them. 1 John would later draw on this teaching where we read "*Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer*" (1 John 3:15)

What about adultery? In it's true meaning the law didn't speak only about the act, but was concerned with the lustful motives that led to the act. Jesus speaks almost sarcastically, to those who excuse adultery on the grounds of 'Oh, I just couldn't help myself!' by suggesting that maybe plucking out their eye or chopping off a limb would solve the problem. Of course that is not meant to be taken literally, it's a way of helping us see where the true problem lay, namely in the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

When speaking of divorce Jesus says that marriage was meant for life – but Moses allowed divorce, because it happened, not because it was the right thing to do. Again, by linking divorce to adultery we are asked to consider interior motives. If we get them in order, maybe the rest can follow suit.

What about vows and promises? Simply this. Never mind the paperwork, just be the sort of person whose 'yes' means 'yes' and whose 'no' means 'no'.

What about revenge? The law said 'Insist on your rights; go for repayment'. But in the Kingdom God's blessings rest on the merciful. God does not reward us according to our wrongdoing, but offers forgiveness. God loves us even when we act like enemies. So we should have a similar attitude – inside – towards others. That doesn't do away with justice but points us to a God who acts. Paul writes to the Romans, '*Do not take revenge my friends, for it is written 'It is mine to avenge, I will repay', says the Lord*'

Attacking the values and instincts that lie at the root of society is not easy! But it is to these things that Jesus calls us. Poverty of Spirit, Mourning, Meekness, Hunger for

Righteousness, Mercy, Purity, Peacemaking, Willingness to be persecuted for the truth
On these values, Jesus invites us to build our lives. And it is a risky business!

If you are not aggressive, how do you get ahead?

If you don't hit back, what is to stop you from being taken for a ride?

If you go for purity, won't you miss out on some of the pleasures of this world?

If you make a stand, won't somebody try and knock you down?

Wouldn't it be better not to commit yourself?

The sermon on the mount calls us to walk out of step with society and invites us to abandon the wisdom of this world for responsiveness to God's will, whatever the cost. The cost is high. In fact it takes everything we are and all we have.

To quote the New International Bible Commentary: 'These sayings express the inherent rule of the kingdom of God, are God's ultimate way of dealing with humanity exhibited in the life and death of Jesus, who went to the cross. All such hermeneutical considerations are not a matter of watering them down, finding a meaning that does seem reasonable and with which we can live. They are not to be made "reasonable," for they violate the "common sense" of this world and point to another reality. They ask us whether we are oriented to the God who has redefined power and kingship in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.'

Matthew's gospel begins by speaking of Kingship. We are given the example of a terrible King in Herod. We are taken down to the Jordan to hear John the Baptist declaring we need to get ready for something new. We have witnessed Jesus calling disciples to embrace a new vision for their lives.

The challenge now is as to whether we can live by the rules of this new kingdom that redefines everything that we thought life was about! The last verse of this section seems particularly jarring!

⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Reviewing the laws and their interpretation we may be tempted to think, well, I can get there if I just try a little harder! But then we get this one. 'Be Perfect!' How perfect? 'As perfect as God!'

Barclay points out that the Greek word used here for perfect is 'teleios'. 'Teleios' did not mean absolute moral perfection or even mean being able to keep all the laws. It was a word associated with completeness. 'Be complete'.

For example a person fully grown is 'teleios' in relation to a young child. A student who had graduated in their subject was 'teleios' in comparison to one just beginning their studies. Barclay comments '*A thing is 'teleios' if it realized the purpose for which it is planned; a man is perfect if he realizes the purpose for which he was created and sent into the*

world'

The Hebrew equivalent of the word 'teleios' is 'tamîm' which means 'wholeness.' We read in Deuteronomy 18:13: "*You shall be perfect before the Lord your God.*" In other words 'You must live out your faith whole-heartedly before God'. This fits in well with the emphasis of the sermon that actions begin on the inside, be they for good or for bad. It's a matter of the heart!

John the Baptist had spoken of the Kingdom as being 'at hand' or 'near'. In Jesus Christ God has begun to take the action that brings us to true freedom. As we open our lives to Jesus royal control, His love breaks into the daily life we live, into the heart of our character, our motives, our thoughts and our desires.

Taking Jesus as King, we turn our fears over to Him and seek for Him to rebuild our lives on the things He says have real value. If He truly is the King of Kings and His rule is truly the rule to follow, then although living His way appears to be a risky business it is a risk we need to take.

Risk is hardly the adequate word to use. It is more a matter of faith. And faith carries with it the notion of obedience that the confession 'Jesus is Lord' implies. The choice before us is whether we choose to live by the standards and morality of this world or embrace the values of the Kingdom Jesus proclaims, believing that to do so will transform not only our own lives, but the life of this world.

To embrace the Jesus way is also to be embraced by His love. We are promised the help and guidance of His Holy Spirit working within us and around us to make us 'perfect'. Perfect that is in the sense of being made whole and granted the ability to finish the work which He has started within us!

In the words of Paul to the Philippians '*I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.*' (Philippians 1:6). And next time we shall continue our journey through the mountaintop sermon!