

“According to Matthew”

A study of the Gospel of Matthew
Part 8: More from the Mountaintop

We are continuing to look at the Sermon on the Mount. We have outlined the principles, looked at a few case studies, and thought about what it means to live as citizens of God’s Kingdom. In the next section the sermon takes a look at four pathways that lead us away from the Kingdom rather than towards it. They are:

- Visible Piety
- Material Success
- Misused Authority
- Listening to False Leaders

VISIBLE PIETY

We begin with Matthew 6:1-18

Matthew 6:1 "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. ² "So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

⁵ "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹ "This, then, is how you should pray: " 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, ¹⁰ your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹ Give us today our daily bread. ¹² Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. ' ¹⁴ For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

¹⁶ "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

‘Be careful’ says Jesus, ‘Not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them’. It is a very natural thing to want to be appreciated. It is a healthy thing to want to be a leader, bringing others to know God. But there are religious games that people of every age play, which draw them away from the Kingdom.

In Jesus day one game was to have a trumpeter announce whenever someone give alms (charity) to the poor. The poor would come along, and so would a host of admiring observers. They would watch as the giver gained a reputation for piety and generosity.

Another game was played with prayer. A person would stand and pray where they could be noticed, in a well-attended synagogue or on a busy street corner. The prayer would be long and wordy so as to give evidence of piety and breeding. In contrast Jesus offers us a model of praying in the words of the Lords prayer, a simple prayer that covers all the bases and is linked to the intentions of the heart, particularly when it came to reflecting the forgiving nature of God.

The same game was played with fasting. Those who fasted made sure everybody could witness the pains they were going through. Some would even rub dirt on their faces so all could see how committed to their task they truly were.

All these games were not played with God in mind, but in order to boost the individuals earthly standing. They gave the impression that the Kingdom of God could be found through imitating such acts. It was easy for an honest seeker to be attracted to such a seemingly pious lifestyle. Jesus by contrast suggests the practice of ‘secret giving and doing’.

As we have seen throughout the sermon, once again the attention is upon the inner motives rather than the outward acts. Who are we giving for? What is it we are expressing through our giving? Self-promotion or the love of God? Are we being generous so others will think well of us or because we are moved by God’s love to respond to the needs that we see?

By instructing us to practice our generosity and spirituality in private we are being instructed to allow the Kingdom to grow in us so as we may be the salt and of the world. There is a song the children sang one Sunday “Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me”. It begins by reworking our motives and challenging our allegiances. We are invited to dig deeply and ask whom we are serving through our actions of piety. Our self? Our neighbor? Our Father who art in heaven? The great benefit of doing things in secret is that it helps us clarify where our priorities lie!

We move to another dangerous pathway. Matthew 6:19-33

MATERIAL SUCCESS

¹⁹ "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. ²² "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. ²³ But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness! ²⁴ "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.

²⁵ "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Who of you by

worrying can add a single hour to his life? ²⁸ "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

³¹ So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

It was widely believed in Jesus day that wealth was a sign of God's blessing. The rich man was close to God, the poor man was somehow under God's judgment. Jesus provides a new frame of reference in which to place our material concerns. ¹⁹ *"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal."*

Jesus says 'Do not store up treasures' because such is a practice that leads to a darkened eye and divided heart. The eye is the organ of perception through which the whole personality is guided. If we focus our vision on what the world calls success our perception will become distorted and the light of God's revelation will be blocked out. Our whole personality will be darkened.

Worse still our will shall be affected as well. 'God' and 'Success' will compete in our personalities and ultimately one or the other will shape our values. *"You cannot serve God and money"* v24. But Jesus takes us beyond that, encouraging us to not even be anxious for the most basic necessities. We are to *'Seek first the Kingdom of God'*. But surely that is kind of difficult? Where do we find the courage to live like that?

Jesus answers by talking about birds and flowers. God looks after them. God gives them their beauty. Don't you think God can take care of you? He challenges our lack of faith, comparing us to pagans and unbelievers. Sure, every day will bring troubles, but trust God and don't take on unnecessary baggage!

As we move into chapter 7 we are warned of another dangerous pathway (7:1-14)

MISUSED AUTHORITY

^{NIV} **Matthew 7:1 "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. ² For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. ³ "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ⁴ How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.**

⁶ "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces. ⁷ "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. ⁹ "Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? ¹¹ If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

¹² So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law

and the Prophets. ¹³ "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. ¹⁴ But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

"Do not judge others" is a warning directed against those who sought to exalt themselves above and beyond their other 'brothers and sisters' in the faith. The Kingdom was a community and there were certain actions that if embraced could quickly destroy any sense of true fellowship.

In human society there is always a pecking order. Who's the Queen Bee? Who's the Boss? Within the Kingdom there are different functions but only One Lord. Paul would later give the picture of the church as being the body of Christ, a unity in which every part was equally valued and essential to its health.

Whilst it is important to have some folk in positions of authority, it was equally important that in the Kingdom it was recognized that with authority came great responsibility. Authority was an avenue to greater service, not to lording it over others! This verse about 'judging' is in relation to the abuse of authority.

Within any community there exist power struggles. Even the first disciples debated as to which of them should be Jesus right and left hand men when He came to power. Not surprisingly He told them that they didn't understand what they were asking!

Sadly much of Church History is often a testimony of power struggles and fights for control over others, in the name of religion. From the power of cardinals and popes in the Middle Ages to the petty disputes that can cripple the smallest of congregations, it seems we are slow to grasp the message about not judging others.

One of the more subtle ways of seeking to mask judgmental attitudes we call gossip, or in old English 'murmuring'. The reason people jump on the rumor mill is to make themselves look better. By saying 'Can you believe what so and so is doing?' often the subtext is 'We wouldn't possibly behave like that. We are above that kind of thing'. People exalt themselves through smearing others.

If we are to find the Kingdom, Jesus suggests we abandon the right to judge. Instead He teaches humility and servant-hood. He talks of asking, seeking and knocking, of approaching Kingdom life with a deep sense of our need for God's good gifts and with full confidence that our God is able to supply what we need. 'Blessed are those who know their need for God, for they shall be satisfied'. He talks of God's loving intent towards us; "Would a father give a son a stone if they asked him for bread?"

He seems to say, 'Would you like others to judge you? No? So treat others like you would like them to treat you; you have responsibilities towards your brothers and sisters in this new Kingdom'. He also recognizes that this is not an easy road to follow, speaking of it as being through a narrow gate and a road which many choose to ignore.

Our final warning continues on the theme of authority and appears to focus particularly on those in leadership. Matthew 7:15-23

LISTENING TO FALSE LEADERS

¹⁵ "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. ¹⁶ By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. ²¹ "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' ²³ Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'

Jesus warns us that not everybody in leadership, even in our sacred communities, is there for the right reasons. But how do we discern the righteous from the rogues? 'By their fruits you will recognize them' is the perspective we are offered.

An early Church Manual, that dates back to 100 AD, known as the 'Didache' (or Teaching) has a passage that deals with visiting 'missioners and charismatists, itinerant preachers who would instruct the faithful. It provides examples of how the early church sought discernment.

"Every missionary who comes to you should be welcomed as the Lord, but he is not to stay more than a day or two. If he stays for three days, he is no genuine missionary' 'While a charmatist is uttering words you are not to subject them to any tests or verifications. Nevertheless not all who speak in trances are charmatists, unless they also exhibit the manners and conduct of the Lord. It is by their behavior that you can tell the imposter from the true. 'If speaking in a trance he says 'Give me money (or anything else) do not listen to him. On the other hand if bids you give it to someone else who is in need, nobody should criticize him" (Didache Part 1:12)

Jesus speaks of those who will say 'Lord, Lord' and offer to lead the way to his Kingdom. But the false prophets will bear their own kind of bad fruit.

- A faith marked by public rather than private piety
- A concern for material things over and above spiritual things
- A judgmental attitude towards their sisters and brothers in Christ.

Such leaders are to be avoided because they cannot lead us in the ways of the Kingdom, no matter how wonderful the signs and wonders performed at their hands may be. Again we are back to the intentions of the heart. In a leaders heart must be the desire to be a servant, not to be a ruler. Be they a Sunday School Teacher, hold a position in a church organization, be a deacon or elder or pastor the example all are called to follow is that of Jesus who came amongst us as the Servant king.

Chapter 7 closes with a simple yet powerful illustration that focuses on the importance of hearing the Word and doing the will of God as the way of the Kingdom. Matthew 7:24-27

THE HOUSE ON THE ROCK

²⁴ "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. ²⁶ But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷ The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

I always hear the Sunday School song ... "The rains came down and the floods came up..." playing in my head every time I hear that reading. The point is crystal clear. Life brings many storms our way. We can only withstand them by building our lives on genuine Kingdom teaching and principles.

In Matthew 5 we heard the marvelous words of the Beatitudes and saw Jesus starting to explain their implications through a number of case studies on such questions as anger, adultery, divorce and revenge. All the time the focus is upon our inner lives as being the place where our relationship with God and the principles of God's kingdom are to be established.

In chapters 6 & 7 this teaching is built upon by showing right and wrong ways of building Kingdom values: Play acting religion; focussing on material wealth rather than spiritual vales; holding onto judgmental rather than humble attitudes; listening to false leaders.

Whilst there is so much teaching and so many themes in these chapters there strands that seem to hold them together.

- To adopt kingdom values means abandoning all concern for whatever others may think of us and concentrate instead on our relationship with God.
- To adopt Kingdom values requires trust in God's ability to meet our deepest needs.
- To adopt Kingdom values means walking gently one with another. We are called to be encouragers not judges, to practice discernment not condemnation and recognize our mutual need for the love of God to renew our lives.

Such are ways we walk in the footsteps of the King.

The impact of the sermon on the mount cannot be over-stated. Even after 2000 years it still challenges our complacency and calls us to examine our values. It remains as radical to us today as it ever was! Such is well captured by the final two verses of chapter 7: 28-29

²⁸ When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at His teaching, ²⁹ because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

Chapters 8 through 11 continue on the theme of 'authority' and offer us examples of how Christ's authority developed. But more of that next time....