

Matthew 5:1-12

Bless Your Heart

Christians can be guilty of using words that are either poorly defined or completely unknown by non-believers. The average person doesn't use words like "holy," "righteous," "glory," or "grace" very often. Christians often assume the definition without clearly defining what we mean. The word "blessed" is one of the more prominent examples. Chances are, most Christians struggle to clearly define it.

As the reader of Scripture approaches the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12), the meaning "bless" is vital to a proper interpretation. But what does it mean? In Southern culture, "Bless your heart" has about 1,000 meanings. It could be positive, negative, sympathetic, condemning, or a host of other options. One would need to understand southern culture and the context to tell the difference.

The Bible uses the term primarily in three ways. Two are worth exploring (the third is "praise" and "worship" see Psalm 103). The first is **Covenantal Favor** defined by faith. This usage describes vertical, covenantal favor of God. It is used primarily in the first books of the Bible where God establishes Israel as his covenantal people (see, for example Genesis 12:2, 17:6). Israel was blessed, not because they were righteous or perfect, but because they were loved by God with an eternal, binding love. God chose them through Abraham, redeemed them through Moses, cleansed them through the priests, established them through Joshua, protected them through David, prospered them through Solomon, pursued them through the prophets, rescued them through Nehemiah, and saved them through Jesus.

As God's chosen people, they were, by grace, blessed. This relationship was initiated, secured, and protected by God himself. Remember that Abraham was not chosen by God because of his righteousness. Joshua explained Abraham "served other gods" (Joshua 24:2) before the Lord called him. God "took your father Abraham from beyond the [Euphrates] River and led him through all the land of Canaan, and made his offspring many" (Joshua 24:3).

The secret to the blessed life in this context is faith. Apart from a vibrant relationship with our Creator-Redeemer, we will, at best, be wandering in the dark. When people encounter Jesus, their lives are changed. This is illustrated by the miracles: the blind see, the deaf hear, the demonized are liberated, the dead are raised. So too, unless we rekindle our relationship with our Savior and live by faith, we will never enjoy God's blessings.

Faith is stronger than circumstances. At the end of the Beatitudes, Jesus proclaims blessing upon those who suffer for righteousness (Matthew 5:11-12). If circumstances, experiences, and the

opinions of others shape our joy, then persecution should rob us of joy. But, according to Jesus, living by faith secures blessing despite circumstances.

The second meaning of “bless” is **Human Flourishing** brought about through wisdom. If the first Hebrew word described vertical, covenantal favor, the second describes horizontal, human experience. The first is a matter of Faith. The second is a matter of Wisdom. A man can be blessed in the context of redemption, but due to foolish decisions and a lack of virtue, can suffer the consequences of his foolishness.

No wonder, then, that while the first usage is dominated among the Patriarchs and the narratives about the chosen people of Israel, the second usage dominates the Psalms and Proverbs. In fact, of the 45 usages of this word in the OT, 26 of them are found in Psalm and Proverbs. The open two verses of Psalm 1 states, “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; ² but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.” We can conclude, then, that to live the Blessed life is to flourish, prosper, or to be joyful. The Blessed man or woman, then, is one who enjoys the benefits of wisdom.

This experience of flourishing is described in both personal (see Psalm 34:8; Proverbs 3:13) and communal contexts (Proverbs 14:21, 20:7). This should be common sense. Much of human suffering is human caused. A life lived apart from self-control, humility, patience, sacrificial love, selflessness, or faith is a life riddled with conflict, vice, and suffering. Keep burning bridges and see if it produces joy. Keep fighting for your entitlements and see if it produces personal gratification. Stay angry, refuse to forgive, and complain constantly and see where it ends. In essence, the wise enjoy a more fulfilling and happy life.

Jesus highlights both the personal and relational aspects of blessings. Blessed are the individuals who are “poor in spirit” (vs. 3), “mourn” (vs. 4), “meek” (vs. 5), and those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (vs. 6). Likewise, blessed are those who are a blessing to others. These are the ones who “are merciful” (vs. 7), “are pure in heart” (vs. 8), and “are the peacemakers” (vs. 9). In essence, the blessed are a blessing. Those who live by faith and walk by wisdom are a blessing to others.

The benefits of such blessed lives are evidenced in the Beatitudes. They are satisfied (vs. 6), receive mercy (vs. 7), are favored (“shall see God” in vs. 8), and are adopted by God (“called sons of God” in vs. 9).

If Wisdom and Virtue are the keys to human flourishing, then why do we spend so much time on careers, wealth, and self-help nonsense? If we invested in *wisdom* as much as our self-esteem, we’d be better off. If we invested in *virtue* as much as temporary pleasure and mindless entertainment, we’d be better off.

Shortly after sharing a Parable without explaining its meaning, Jesus explained to his disciples while the interpretation was not given. His answer was that there are some who will hear him, but not listen. They will see him, but not perceive who he really is. But the Disciples of Jesus are not this way. They are blessed. “[B]lessed are your eyes,” Jesus said, “for they see, and your ears, for they hear” (Matthew 13:16).

Matthew 5:14-16

Light to the World

Growing up, my mother joined the Longaberger baskets craze. For the uninitiated, a Longaberger basket was an overly priced, fancy basket one could buy and never use. Our home was decorated with baskets never utilized. They were, at best, decorative items to beautify the home, not practical baskets to carry things. I struggled to understand what the purpose of a basket was if it is just going to sit on a shelf and collect dust.

Then again, what good is the gospel if we keep it to ourselves or hide it in our sanctuaries? What good is the gospel if it never used? In Matthew 5:13, Jesus encourages his follows to **Preserve the gospel like salt**. Beginning in verse 14, he exhorts us to **Proclaim the gospel as light**.

The passage begins with the **Rule** of light (vs. 14a). As a migraine sufferer, I am keenly aware of light. I prefer rooms lit dimly. When a migraine appears, all light becomes intense and can add to the suffering. I'll never forget my basket-loving mother begging my father to shut off the security light outside because it was too bright – a request he could not honor.

We take for granted our constant access to light. If you awake in the middle of the night, you not only have light on your phone, but you will pass countless switches and lamps along the way to wherever you're going. That was not the case in the ancient world. When the sun set, it was dark. The only light available was the moon and stars and fire. Light, then, was necessary. It was a valuable commodity used to illuminate one's way.

Jesus states clearly we are both salt (verse 13) and light (verse 14). He does not say, we "ought to be/should be/might be" salt/light, but that we *are*. This shouldn't surprise us. The Old Testament is full of similar metaphors where Israel is depicted as light to the Gentiles (see Isaiah 42:6, 49:6; Daniel 12:3). In the same way, Jesus calls on His followers to not only preserve the message of the gospel, but to be the light of the world in the process. The gospel is not just an expensive decorative item. The purpose of preserving the gospel is to proclaim it. In fact, the best way to preserve the gospel is to proclaim it.

What exactly does it mean to be light of the world? In the rest of verse 14, we see the **Refuge** of light (vs. 14b). Have you ever travelled on country roads and in the distance, you see a bunch of lights? That's how you know you're approaching a town of some sort. The more lights, the larger the town. As a teenager, we took a trip to Bushnell, IL (in the middle of nowhere). It was corn for hours in pitch darkness. Running out of gas, we did not want to be stuck in the middle of the night near the children of the corn! It was then, in the distance, we saw lights.

Jesus likens his metaphor with another metaphor. We are like a city on a hill. Cities in the ancient world were typically built on hills because they provided cooler breezes, were easier to defend, and were visible from afar. In a world without electricity, everyone could see a city on a hill. Cities were places of refuge that would keep you safe in time of war. In your desperation, lost in the middle of the wilderness, you would look up and see in the distance, the city on a hill. You would then know you were going to be ok. We are like a city on a hill. The whole world is plunged into deep darkness. But in moments of despair, doubt, uncertainty, etc. let it be that the church is a city of refuge.

Finally, Jesus describes the **Radiance** of light (vs. 15-16). Not only are we like a city on a hill, we are like an unshaded lamp. Jesus explains in verse 15 that the purpose of a lamp is to shine. Imagine walking in your home late at night and it is pitch dark. You find a lamp and turn it on only to discover it is smothered by a thick blanket. Who in their right mind would do such a thing?

The house Jesus describes were a single room meaning that a single lamp was sufficient to provide light for that house. It would be foolish to light a lamp and then muzzle or even block the illumination. The purpose of a lamp is to pierce the darkness. Only a fool would shade it.

If we're not careful, Christians can be equally foolish. We Shade Our Light by Unfaithfulness. The center of Jesus's argument is "good works" (vs. 15). The purpose of good works is not so that we can get praised, but that God would. Faithfulness brings glory to God meaning we are living for something greater than ourselves. Looking for purpose? Pursue the greater glory of God. Unfaithfulness and unrepented sin shades our light.

We also shade our light by cowardice. Far too many Christians are quiet about their faith. American Christians often prefer ease more than eternity and safety more than the Savior. To live by faith is a courageous thing. How much faith do you have? How bright is your lamp?

As English Bishop Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley were about to be burned at the stake for their Christian faith, Latimer said: "Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out."

Mammoth Cave is the darkest place I've ever been. When they turned off the lights in the depth of the earth, it was scary dark. Without any source of light, there is no way you could ever find yourself out of the darkness. The world is in such darkness blinded by depravity and the devil. Apart from the light of the gospel, no one can find their way to the Blessed Life (see Ephesians 5:8; Colossians 1:13).

You are the Light of the World.

This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine
Hide it under a bushel? No. I'm gonna let it shine
Let it shine til Jesus comes, I'm gonna let it shine?

Matthew 5:17-20

Purpose of the Bible

No doubt we are aware that on the law books in each state are bizarre laws that are largely ignored. For example, in Indiana, not only can baths only be taken between October and March, but the value of Pi is 3. In Kentucky, throwing eggs at a public speaker could be punished up to one year in prison (repealed in 1975). It is, apparently, also illegal to marry the same man more than three times.

Although we might laugh at such laws (and countless others could be documented), we often approach the Old Testament law in a similar way. Perhaps we are familiar with some of the Mosaic Laws that, to the modern reader, are equally strange. In Deuteronomy 22:6-7, we are told if young birds in a nest are taken, the mother must be let go. In Leviticus 19:27, men are told not to shave the sides of their beards in honor of the dead. Unfortunately, Deuteronomy 12:23 seems to band medium rare steak nor can we eat the meat of a bull that was stoned to death because it had gored someone. Often critics of the Bible highlight the command in Leviticus 19:19 to not wear clothes made of more than one fabric.

Knowing what to do with such laws is difficult for the believer. Affirming the full inspiration of Scripture, the modern reader is left scratching their head. How do we reconcile our modern world with such bizarre laws? More than that, how do we understand Scripture especially considering the finished work of Christ? In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses this issue.

Jesus begins by exploring the **Place of Scripture** (vs. 17-19). Every law exists because of the evil and foolishness of man. Speed laws exist because drivers cannot control themselves. Regulations exist because the honor system rarely works. Scripture reveals the obvious point that we are, by nature, sinners. The best laws can do, then, is regulate behavior by announcing our tendency to look out for ourselves and not our neighbor.

The law may show there is something wrong, but it is inadequate in transforming the root problem within the heart of men and women. Obeying traffic laws does not make us good people. Being the case regarding civic laws, it is equally true with the laws of Moses. Jesus begins by stating, “do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets,” Jesus preached, “I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (vs. 17). Jesus likely has both legalists (who turn faith into rule-keeping) and moral libertarians (who disregard obedience) in mind. Both are guilty of adjusting Scripture to fit their own wants.

In contrast to both extremes, Jesus assures us he would never “abolish” but will ultimately “fulfill” Scripture. That is to say that all the Bible finds its fulfillment in him. This is an incredible statement

from Jesus. If we want to understand Scripture, including its theocratic laws, we must see Christ as its center. “The Bible,” said Martin Luther, “is the cradle wherein Christ is laid.”

Since Scripture is sufficient, it is binding. We must obey it within the context of Christ’s fulfillment. “Therefore whoever relaxes 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 does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (vs. 19). But how does one keep *all* of Scripture. That seems impossible.

Jesus, then, directs our attention to the **Purpose of the Law** (vs. 20). The Law directs us to both God’s holiness and our guilt. We do not compare to the greatness and righteousness of our Creator. We desperately, therefore, need a redeemer. Nevertheless, history is replete with examples of those who claim otherwise. The Pharisees, for example, made adherence to the Mosaic Law the foundation of their hope. So strong in their beliefs, they added additional regulations to Scripture to make them more burdensome.

Regarding the Sabbath Law, for example, the religious elites debated what the meaning of “work” and “burden” meant. They concluded a burden was food equal to the weight of a dried fig, enough wine for mixing in a goblet, milk enough for one swallow, honey enough to put on a wound, oil enough to anoint a small member, water enough to moisten an eye salve, paper enough to write a customs-house notice, ink enough to write two letters of the alphabet, and reed enough to make the pen. They debated whether a man could lift a lamp from one place to another on the Sabbath or if a woman could wear a wig that was too heavy. These laws clearly went beyond Scripture.

The real problem was not just that it added to Scripture, but that it revealed the true nature of legalistic religion. Legalism cares about outward adherence, not inward purity. The law is limited by the outside. No legislation can reform the heart. Jesus, therefore, concludes that if we want to truly be righteous, our righteousness must exceed “that of the scribes and Pharisees” (vs. 20).

What follows in the sermon are six examples of what it means to live in the Kingdom by inward piety rather than outward self-righteousness. Jesus demonstrates Kingdom living begins with the heart. The law could never demonstrate our holiness, but show our inability, wretchedness, and rebellion against God. While the Law screams, “You can’t!” the gospel concludes, “Christ already has.” He is the fulfillment of both the Law and the Prophets.

Traditionally, the Mosaic Law has been divided into three categories – the Moral, Judicial, and Ceremonial. Christ fulfills each of them. In the moral law, Jesus lived in perfect righteousness thus accomplishing for us what we could not. He serves, therefore, as the perfect substitute as our atonement. In the judicial law, he operates as both the judge and the condemned. He satisfies the wrath of God by taking our sins upon himself. Finally, in the ceremonial law, he operates as both the great high priest and as lamb simultaneously. He offers the sacrifice and is the sacrifice. Thus, we have direct access to God through the blood of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). This is good news indeed.

Matthew 5:21-22

Thou Shalt Not Choose Anger

On May 22, 1856, Representative Preston Brooks grabbed his thick cane, walked onto the Senate floor, and began to violently beat Senator Charles Sumner. His supporters kept the other senators from coming to his aid. Instead, they had to watch as Senator Sumner was viciously beaten. After thirty blows with the cane, Rep. Brooks stopped. His cane had shattered. The beating was in response to a speech Senator Sumner gave following the passing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Senator Sumner was a northern abolitionist and made personal attacks against Rep. Brooks and others.

Although the “Caning of Charles Sumner” is a startling true story of our history, such tales of violence and malice are all too common in our daily lives. Hate is a human cancer as is anger, resentment, contempt, strife, malice, and pride. Although the rise of murder and violence are worth our attention, we would do well to address what motivates it.

Previously, Jesus claimed that unless our righteousness surpassed the religious elites, we could not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven (vs. 20). Their righteousness stopped at outward obedience. While they looked holy and good, they were inwardly corrupted and poisoned. What follows in the rest of chapter 5 is a series of examples of true righteousness that begins in the heart.

Jesus begins by exploring anger. The outward, legalistic law of the religious elites condemned only murder. Citing the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:13), they could congratulate themselves on their innocence. The assumption, again, is that God demands simple, outward obedience. Ignoring their progressive hatred of Jesus, the Pharisees would assume they were holy for keeping this commandment. Jesus suggested otherwise.

Doctors know that a headache could be caused by stress or other minor issues, but they could also be a symptom of something more severe. That is why those suffering from chronic migraines or headaches may undergo an MRI exam. What good is treating the symptom when something more severe is its cause? The same is true with violence. What good is addressing the hands when the heart is ignored.

What lies underneath violent crime rates is anger, jealousy, fury, vengeance, rage, malice, etc. These inward sins are the real root of the issue. Jesus categorizes hate into three progressive categories. The first is anger which leads to court. Interestingly, this is the same court the religious elites said murders should go. Jesus, then, is equating the two. Although harsh on the surface, consider which has contributed to more societal, relational, and personal damage; murder or unchecked rage? Child

abuse, domestic violence, or children praying daddy doesn't come home in a bad mood. We might brag about not being violent, but most struggle with aggression and rage.

If anger leads to court, *Raca* leads to the Supreme Court. This court describes the Sanhedrin which was the court that condemned Jesus. Although a difficult word to translate, *raca* comes from a Hebrew word meaning "empty" and thus "vain" or "worthless." It was a word of contempt and ridicule. If anger described inward rage, *raca* is the vocalization of that rage. Name calling, reputation destruction, aggression, and tearing someone down reveals our true hearts. Jesus said, "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34b). Inward wrath cannot be suppressed for long. It will manifest itself verbally.

Finally, *fool* leads to divine court (Hell). Although some consider *fool* to be an equivalent to *raca*, there are some differences. Throughout Scripture, to call someone a fool was to sentence them to Hell or at the very least to call them spiritually empty. Can you imagine the type of hate it takes for to wish someone was accursed of God? Consider how often we claim we hate someone or wish they were suffering under the judgment of God. This is malice fueled by indifference. The irony is, of course, Jesus says this attitude is worthy of Hell itself.

If you believe Jesus is being harsh in equating inward rage with outward violence, consider the rest of the story. Matthew subtly shows us that before long, the religious elites move from disapproval of Jesus to discontentment with him to openly rejecting him to hating him to fearing him to killing him (follow the trajectory in Matthew 9:11, 34, 12:14, 24, 15:12, 22:15).

Or consider what the murder rate would be around the world if we cured the heart? Before we clench fists or load guns, we will sharpen our tongue and poison our heart (see Matt. 15:19; 1 John 3:15).

The cure to anger will be addressed more directly starting in verse 23, but a few points can be drawn from these two verses. First, **Jesus never chose resentment**. Many are quick to highlight Jesus's anger in the temple (see Mark 11 and John 2). All that tells us is that righteous anger is good. It says nothing regarding unrighteous anger. Interestingly, Jesus never chose anger when he was reviled, hated, rejected, abused, betrayed, mocked, or even crucified. He never chose anger when something was done against him personally. Instead, Jesus chose forgiveness, patience, love, and meekness.

Secondly, **Jesus demanded surrender**. At the root of anger is not getting what I want (see also James 4:1ff). Where there is sin, pride and selfishness are nearby. The gospel, however, requires us to surrender our rights and entitlements to Jesus (see Matt. 16:24). In so doing, we experience the freedom of leaving justice to God (see Romans 12:19)

Finally, we should point out that **Jesus was unjustly crucified** because of rage. The inward turned outward; the spiritual became physical. The irony is that some in the crowd who heard Jesus's sermon would soon thereafter mock him as he hung upon the cross with the self-righteous feeling they were somehow innocent.

The good news is that despite the rage of the mob and the envious, enough blood was shed at the cross. The only thing that will heal relationships, bring peace, and satisfy our wrath is the grace of God accomplished by Christ at the cross. Choose peace. Choose forgiveness. Choose healing.

Matthew 5:23-26

Be Ye Reconciled and Other Things We Like to Ignore

In high school, a teammate of mine broke his leg sliding for a tackle in a soccer game. He was rushed to the emergency room where doctors reset the bone. They soon discovered it wasn't set correctly, forcing them to re-break the bone. He was rightfully frightened knowing the pain it would involve. The doctors warned him refusal would lead to more pain and limited use.

Sometimes you must break a bone for it to heal. The same is true with relationships. When relationships fracture, they must be reset and the sooner, the better. Burning bridges, holding grudges, and surrendering to bitterness does not produce healing, but just more brokenness.

Jesus begins with the **Command to Reconcile** (vs. 23-24). He has been arguing that outward piety is no cover for inward corruption. Bragging about not being violent doesn't mean we are righteous or holy. Hate corrodes the human heart. Given the prevalence of anger and bitterness, what do we do when we've been wronged or have a broken relationship with someone?

The answer to the damage caused by strife is reconciliation. Reconciliation sounds wonderful, but it is rarely practiced. When we get our feelings hurt, don't get our way, or when things are blown out of proportion, we often break the relationship choosing to never heal. How many people in our lives, do we now want nothing to do with? How many have said things they regret and never apologized? How many have lashed out and never repented? How many have been wounded and just cut someone off forever?

Reconciliation is a gospel issue. How can we, as Christians, accept the reconciling work of Jesus in our lives and still refuse to forgive and restore harmed relationships? To refuse to even make an honest effort at reconciliation is to proclaim that my sins against my Maker pale in comparison to the sins of others against me.

Jesus then shows how **Reconciliation Purifies our Worship** (vs. 23-24). Jesus suggests one cannot truly worship our Creator-Redeemer unless we reconcile with others. In referencing "gift at the altar," Jesus presumably has the Temple on the Day of Atonement in mind. There was no more holy day on the Jewish calendar. The purpose of the gift was to seek God's forgiveness and mercy.

Notice that who is to blame in this conflict is secondary. Jesus does not suggest reconciliation is only necessary when it is your fault. When we reconcile, we are taking responsibility for the role we played in the conflict. Likewise, Jesus instructs we must start the process of reconciliation. Even if they wronged, hurt, lied, betrayed, or harmed you, the believer must start the process of reconciliation. Most people do not reconcile either because they don't want to or because they are

waiting for the other person take the first step. For Christians, the first step of reconciliation was taken at the cross.

Failure to do so negatively affects our worship. When there is animosity or hate or bitterness in our heart, there cannot be genuine worship. We know this is true anecdotally. Many leave churches due to irreconciled conflict. Maybe the pastor didn't visit enough or the worship leader's attitude was frustrating or your children's Sunday School teacher said something that bothered you. Either way, we have allowed unreconciled conflict to harm our worship. It is hard to sing of the love of God with a scowl. It is hard to seek forgiveness when we refuse to forgive. It is hard to grow when we are stuck in the past.

Finally, Jesus shows that **Reconciliation Heals Relationships** (vs. 25-26). If strife harms our spiritual lives, it will certainly harm our personal life. Notice the urgency of Jesus's language, "Come to terms quickly." Just as the time for salvation is now, so too is it time for reconciliation. Waiting to reconcile is unacceptable. Tomorrow will be too late. We are not to allow bitterness, anger, or hate to poison our souls and to separate us from other people.

Jesus uses the image of a judge and the threat of imprisonment. The nature of the crime is not given, but that does not affect its purpose. Jesus is arguing that if you go unreconciled long enough, you will be punished until everything is repaid. And according to the language, you will not be able to pay it back. Allowing poison to ruin relationships will seep into the next relationship. Unhealed wounds and a painful past will affect your future. Good luck untangling a weave of brokenness and bitter anger that has been going on for decades.

Remember the context. The Law cares about outward obedience, not inward righteousness. If we want our righteousness to surpass the religious elites, we must be free of anger and bitterness and be eager and willing to reconcile. You cannot do one without the other. If you want to be free from bitterness, reconcile. If you want to reconcile, choose love over resentment.

In conclusion, we ought to return to the context. Regarding anger, it is not enough to avoid violence. We must reconcile with those whom we are separated from. In so doing, we chose love over hate and peace over violence. If Christ can reconcile us and God, there is nothing that should permanently separate us from others if we truly love Jesus and walk in humility. The world is full of violence and hate, surely Christians can model a better way.

The gospel says that no sin is too great, no folly is too far, and no rebellion too mighty not to be forgiven by God. That is the foundation for relational peace and healing. Everyone has broken relationships that need to be reset. Without doing so, we will never heal. Reconciliation can be painful, but it is necessary. At the cross we find a body broken securing forgiveness, peace, and reconciliation with our God whom we've wronged. Let us go and do the same for others.

Matthew 5:27-37

Out of the Abundance of the Heart ...

A pastor once noticed a group of boys standing around a small stray dog. “What are you doing, boys?” he asked. “Telling lies,” said one of the boys. “The one who tells the biggest lies gets to keep the dog.” “Why, when I was your age,” the shocked minister said, “I never thought of telling a lie.” Crestfallen, the boys looked at one another. Finally, one of them shrugged and said, “I guess the pastor wins the dog.”

Since verse 17, Jesus has been showing how outward sins stem from the heart. He began with violence and showed that before we clench our fist or raise our voices, we have surrendered to anger, resentment, malice, and hate. He continues that trajectory in verse 27 by exploring the inner sin of lust. Although the law condemns adultery, Jesus is more concerned with the lust that leads to it.

Like with murder, adultery is (seemingly) easy to tell if we have violated it or not. One does not need to know the original Greek or Hebrew to determine if we are guilty of either murder or adultery. The violation of marriage vows is serious in Scripture. Although a significant sin, adultery does not “just happen” but is the result of a series of compromises and failures that stem from the heart. When we surrender to lust and fantasy, before long we will tear our marriage and purity asunder. James warned of the same, “But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (James 1:14-15).

Lust is a particularly damaging sin of the heart. It feeds on discontentment (what if I had married that other person?), pride (my perceived happiness is paramount), and resentment (my partner is not fulfilling my needs). Before long, we destroy the bedrock of our lives. In an effort to satisfy our discontentment and pride, we turn others into objects for our own entitlements. Lust has never built a home, but it has ruined countless of them. It is not accidental Jesus addresses divorce immediately after addressing lust (vs. 31-32). No wonder Jesus exhorts us to treat it seriously. Although bodily mutilation should not be taken literally, his point remains clear. We must fight against lust with the same urgency we fight against hate.

It is the final few verses that may seem odd to most American evangelicals. Turning from the heart, Jesus draws our attention to our tongues. The Law demanded we “not swear falsely, but ... perform to the Lord what you have sworn” (see Leviticus 19:12; Numbers 30:2; Deuteronomy 23:21). Just as the religious elites found convenient ways to violate the law, so they reworked the Law’s prohibition against breaking oaths in a way that justified them. The Pharisees taught that one could take an oath and break it so long as they didn’t take that oath in the name of God. This was a convenient way to deceive without accountability.

When our word is untrustworthy, we make a mockery of the God we worship. Jesus claimed to be “the truth” (John 14:6), and we should, therefore, defend and promote it by being truth-tellers. When truth is unknowable, lies are unprovable. Postmodernity has made us less trusting of others (especially institutions) because no one tells the truth. We tell narratives, but not the truth.

Deception is a gospel issue. If people can’t trust us regarding earthly things, how will they listen or trust us when we speak of heavenly things? If I habitually lie to my wife, will she believe me when I tell her I love her? If I am always late for work, will people believe me when I say that I take my job seriously? If I ignore my children, will they believe me when I promise to always be there for them?

In contrast, Jesus exhorts us to “say what we mean and mean what we say.” That is, our words should be good enough as to not need to take an oath or swear by anything. This will require being honest when it is uncomfortable, stepping forward when it is unpopular, and forgiving even when it hurts.

Jesus once suggested that “out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34). It is also out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth lies. Scholars agree there are five general categories of lies. First are **Lies of Denial**. Such gaslighting is an effort to get others to deny reality. The second are **Lies of Omission**. Half-truths usually omit damaging details. Often we “tell our side of the story” and mislead others to believe something negative about those who may have hurt us. When the other party has their say, such details are often not overlooked (see Proverbs 18:17). The third category are **Lies of Fabrication** which describes the manufacturing of facts with an intention to deceive or mislead. The fourth category are **Lies of Minimization**. This is when we minimize the truth by writing off our actions as “accidents,” “easy to fix,” or “no one was hurt.” The goal is to minimize the seriousness of the error, mistake, or sin. It also makes the critic look petty and small. Finally, are **Lies of Exaggeration**. Like every fish story ever told, this lie exaggerates to the point of deception for personal benefit.

The way in which we lie also varies including **gossip** (Proverbs 16:28) which often elevates ourselves or our “group” at the cost of others. We may also try **flattery** (Psalm 12:2) which offers insincere compliments. Flattery praises with the intention to manipulate. Finally, we may simply **slander or libel** (Leviticus 19:6; Proverbs 10:18; 1 Peter 2:1). Slander is reputation destruction which social media has amplified. If love does not keep a record of wrongs (see 1 Corinthians 13), it certainly does not verbalize and share those wrongs.

The prophet Jeremiah warned, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” Jesus rightly directs our attention in our ongoing war against sin by diagnosing the heart. If we are to pursue righteousness, we must judge the action of our fists and our tongues by our hearts.

Matthew 5:38-42

The Bottomless Pit of Revenge

There's an old joke about a letter written by one neighbor to another.

Dear Frank. We've been neighbors for six tumultuous years. When you borrowed my tiller, you returned it in pieces. When I was sick, you blasted rap music. And when your dog went to the bathroom all over my lawn, you laughed. I could go on, but I'm certainly not one to hold grudges. So, I am writing this letter to tell you that your house is on fire.

Cordially, Bob

Although humorous, it does reveal our inclination toward retaliation. Revenge is a bottomless pit. It can never be satisfied. In this context, Jesus reminds us of the *Lex Talionis* law of "eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Again, Jesus is summarizing the teaching of the religious elites while simultaneously quoting from the Mosaic Law (see Ex. 21:23-25; Lev. 24:19-20; Deu. 19:21). Although this was limited to the civil law, the Pharisees weaponized it for their own gain. Instead of an eye for an eye, they preferred to sue for monetary gain any opportunity they could. Sound familiar?

Their motivation was retaliation. The Bible clearly condemns taking personal vengeance (see Lev. 19:18; Prov. 20:22, 24:29). Thus, the religious elites could claim to be faithful to the law, while simultaneously disobeying it. Legalism is always outward, never inward.

In response, Jesus calls us to be more righteous than the legalists (see vs. 20). He begins by encouraging us to **Surrender Respect** by turning the other cheek (vs. 39). A slap was the equivalent of spitting in the face in the modern West or throwing a shoe in the Middle East. It was a sign of rejection and disrespect. Jesus warns against seeking revenge to preserve one's honor. Given that we worship a Savior who gave his life, we are drowning in acceptance and honor. There is no need to prove ourselves. Jesus himself was slapped, spat upon, his beard was plucked, he was stripped naked, and hung on a cross. If anyone deserved to be honored, it was Christ.

Secondly, Jesus tells us to **Surrender our Rights** (vs. 40). Although it sounds as if Jesus has robbery in mind, he likely has a different practice. In the Old Testament, if one were to borrow money, the lender could not charge interest. Instead, the borrower had to leave collateral. If they were poor, they would usually leave their outer garment. When the temperature drops at night, their outer garment may be the only blanket the poor man has. The Old Testament had a provision requiring the loaner to return the garment every night for warmth.

If this provision is violated (for a myriad of reasons), Jesus tells his listeners to not sue or fight but to seek reconciliation. It means to have the integrity to seek forgiveness for what we may have done, to reveal that we are not angry or resentful though we have been wronged. This means that as a Christian, we have surrendered our rights for the glory of Christ. This means that we must be willing to lose. Lose our rights, lose our possessions, lose our wants, and lose our demands.

Thirdly, we must **Surrender our Repose** (vs 41). In the Roman world, soldiers could force a passerby to help them up to one mile. Later in Matthew, soldiers will compel Simon of Cyrene to help Jesus carry his cross to Calvary (cf. vs. 41 and Matthew 27:32). The law required him to help. Jesus, then, is calling them to choose service over bitterness. Don't just go one mile against your wishes, go the extra mile.

Finally, Jesus encourages us to **Surrender our Riches** (vs. 42). Begging was common in Jesus's day especially as one neared the Temple. Jesus requires his followers to be generous with their resources. The issue isn't abundance, but generosity. The principle of generosity in Christianity is not legalism (give 10% and you're done), but the gospel. Christ did not tithe his blood, but gave every drop.

In 1991, two hikers in the Italian Alps stumbled upon a corpse thinking it was a dead hiker. It turns out the man had been dead for over 5,000 years. It's been dubbed "Otzi the Iceman." He is still Europe's oldest (and best) natural human mummy. He lived before Stonehenge was built, the Pyramids were constructed, or even before figures like Gilgamesh. Interestingly, we know how he died; he was a murder victim. Shot in the back with an arrow, he is often called the Abel of the Alps. It's not surprising, is it, that the oldest body we've found, was a victim of murder? Retaliation and revenge will not create a better world. Only resurrection can.

Matthew 5:43

Beyond Semantics: Why Love is the Central Christian Ethic (Part 1)

On October 5, 2006, 25 Amish school children were studying in their local 1-room schoolhouse when a heavily armed man stormed the schoolhouse and held the students hostage. Cornered by the police, Roberts began to shoot the students one until the police stormed in whereby the man shot himself. Only 5 survived.

How would you have responded? Americans, as they always do, donated money to help pay for the medical bills of the victims. The Amish responded by donating some of the money to the widow and orphans of the gunman to help provide for their basic needs. The Amish then publicly forgave their murderer, going so far as to attend the gunman's funeral.

No one said love was easy. But it is mysteriously beautiful.

Jesus begins his discussion on loving one's enemies by highlighting the False Love taught by the religious elites of his day. Strikingly, it matches the ethic of our day. The opening proverb is broken down into two parts. First, love your neighbor and, secondly, hate your enemy. The former is clearly articulated in the Mosaic Law (see Leviticus 19:18) whereas the latter is absent from Scripture. One might be tempted to judge such a proverb as ancient and barbarian, but their justification remains with us.

First, the Jewish leaders used semantics to justify their hate. Even today, we massage language in order to justify our own actions. We are quick to parse words in ways that favor us. The Pharisees did the same thing with God's Word applying it only when it favored them. For example, the Pharisees redefined the meaning of "neighbor." The prologue to the Parable of the Good Samaritan involves a lawyer asking, "who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29). In the parable, Jesus plays on socioeconomic, ethnic, cultural, and racial divides to illustrate that our neighbor is anyone and everyone. In God's Kingdom, love transcends manmade boundaries and tribal barriers.

The reason "neighbor" was so hard to define was because "enemy" was so easy to define. First Century Jews had a long list of people they were told to hate. As a subjugated people, they were not interested in synchronizing their faith with Roman culture. Every day they encountered Roman soldiers with Jewish blood on their hands, Jewish tax collectors profiting off the subjugation of Israel on behalf of an oppressor, Samaritans who interbred with pagan Gentiles, and sinners who were the cause of their suffering. There was plenty of reason to look around and assume God wants you to hate them.

It is easy for us to scoff at this, but hate is not a relic of the past. Human history demonstrates that hate is a moral and spiritual problem, not just a cultural, racial, or political one. The stain of sin on the human heart manifests itself in various forms including racism, class hatred, ethnic bigotry, religious intolerance, and discrimination. Even Christians can be guilty of this.

The good news (i.e. gospel) is the story of how Jesus entered our world of tribalism and hate, suffered under its weight, and conquered it by rising from the grave. If America is going to heal, it will not come through demagogues or conspiracies, but through the triumph of Christ. Jesus showed us the way when he prayed for his enemies while they were watching him suffer and die. If Christ, a Jewish man suffering under the weight of oppression, racial injustice, and religious hate can love his murderous enemies, why can't we?

Choose gospel saturated love. It won't be easy, but it will be beautiful.

On March 8, 2009, Pastor Fred Winters, was shot at point blank range during worship service at First Baptist Church in Marysville, Illinois. Eight days later, his wife, Cindy Winters appeared on CBS and said:

I do not have any hatred, or even hard feelings towards him ... We have been praying for him. One of the first things that my daughter said to me after this happened was, 'You know, I hope that he comes to learn to love Jesus through all of this.' We are not angry at all, and we really firmly believe that he can find hope and forgiveness and peace through this, by coming to know Jesus. And we hope that that happens for him.

No one said love was easy. But it is beautiful. But we can't walk in it until we receive it.

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Matthew 5:44-48

Beyond Semantics: Why Love is the Central Christian Ethic (Part 2)

As a child, I remember watching football games where someone would hold up a sign that simply said “John 3:16” while the cameras zeroed in on the uprights during a field goal attempt. Without a doubt, John 3:16 is the most influential verse in the modern west. What was the most popular verse in the early church? Judging by references made by early Christian writers throughout its first 300 years, the most popular verse was not John 3:16, but Matthew 5:44.

Enemy-love was the hallmark of the early Christians who were a minority and persecuted movement. Others had taught loving one’s neighbors but never imagined forgiving those who wronged them. Only Jesus and his followers took love this far because God did the same for us at the cross.

In verse 43, Jesus warned against false love. He then turns toward a clear understanding of what true, gospel love looks like. In contrast to the rhetoric that dominated Jewish life, Jesus highlights those who were the target of hate as those of whom we should love. Loving one’s enemies violates human reason and is unique throughout history. To demonstrate how far he wants to take this principle, he tells us that those whom we should love include those who *persecute you*. These are the people who wish we didn’t exist and even enjoy watching us suffer. These are the people who want us erased and dead. Love them.

How do we love our worse enemies? First, Jesus commands we **pray for our enemies**. Why should we pray for the people who we struggle to love? Praying for our enemies reminds us they are love by God. When we demonize others, we see them as less than human. That is to say, we view them as unworthy of God’s favor and grace. Simultaneously, we elevate ourselves as worthy of God’s grace. Likewise, prayer seeks the well-being of others. When fueled by hate, we seek the suffering of others. Prayer seeks their well-being. So, as you pray for your aunt’s surgery or your children’s future, pray for your enemy’s well-being. In short, it is hard to hate the people you pray for.

Not only are we to pray for our enemies, but we are commanded to **love our enemies with gospel love**. First, *love is of divine origin* (vs. 45). When we pray and practice genuine love for our enemies, we act like children mimicking their father. If you want to *be sons of your Father*, Jesus exhorts us, then we must love like he does. The assumption is that God is love. Like any good father, he expresses his love openly. How does God show his love? He loves everyone, even his enemies. Just as the sun rises on the righteous, so it rises on the wicked and just as the rain falls on the just, so it rises on the unjust. The point is that God does not discriminate his blessings. If anybody has a right not to love everyone, it is God; and yet he equally blesses all even those who hate him. Somehow, God still

loves those who ignore and reject him. A prejudice love is not divine love. In fact, prejudice love is no better than worldly love. In other words, when we refuse to love enemies, we are no better than the worst of sinners.

Secondly, love is radical (vs. 46-47). Jesus seems to suggest that love, by definition, is universal. Love bound by acceptance and ease isn't love. Its friendship, romance, or affection. By definition, love crosses boundaries and reconciles broken relationships. This is why infatuation and lust will not save your marriage. Only love will. Tolerance will not sustain a family, only love will. Unless love transcends manmade boundaries and borders, then it is not love.

The sort of love most of us practice – a love that says, “I’ll love you if you are both worthy of love and receptive of my love” – is not gospel love. Its worldly love. This is why Jesus draws our attention to wicked tax collectors and Gentiles. Failure to love your neighbor is a fundamental rejection of gospel love. You, therefore, are no different than your pagan neighbor whom you reject.

Thirdly, love conquers (vs. 48). Among Jesus’s audience were legalistic Pharisees who believed their strict adherence to the law made them righteous – perfect even. Yet Jesus shows their failure to love proved they were outside of God’s favor. Who were their enemies? The tax collectors and the Gentiles are mentioned by name. We could add the Samaritans, Roman soldiers and politicians, and countless others. But the person they will grow to hate the most is Jesus – the one who perfectly loves like the Father. Ultimately, if we want to know what love is, look to the cross.

Did Jesus not express forgiving love upon the cross? Not just toward the Pharisees, but toward each of us. What’s more is the ethic of Christianity is a blood-soaked cross. This is why love is almost always connected to the cross in the New Testament (see Romans 5:8; Ephesians 5:25; 1 John 3:16).

The first time I heard the phrase, “the people of the cross,” wasn’t from Christians, but from murderers. On February 2015, ISIS released a video showing the execution of 21 kidnapped Egyptian Christian construction workers. Among other terms, the terrorists referred to them as “the people of the cross.” And like their Savior, each died. They became martyrs for Christ. That title has always stuck to me. We are the people of the cross. Let us love like Jesus upon Calvary.

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Matthew 6:1-4

How the Righteous Give

At the end of the day, we all want to be liked, accepted, and validated. This is why we filter and edit our photos before posting on social media, censure our words around certain people, choose our social circle, want our boss to approve of our job, our spouses to love us, our children to honor us, our in-laws to tolerate us, our friends to like us, and our neighbors to welcome us. We just want to be liked.

This is a serious temptation in religion. Religion and ritual profits off our natural desire to be approved and liked. While our social lives largely involve working for the approval of others, religion adds an extra bonus, the approval of Heaven. When faith is stripped from grace, it will, in the end, promote pride. Jesus addressed this head on. In the opening four verses of the sixth chapter of Matthew, Jesus applied this principle to charity followed by the pride of achieving approval through public spirituality beginning with prayer (vs. 5-15) and then through fasting (vs. 16-18). In these eighteen verses, Jesus accomplishes two things. First, he shows the fakery of religion which is like actors wearing a mask. Secondly, he shows the good news of gospel-love.

Following the Christmas parade growing up, Santa would meet with local kids. One year, I was shocked to discover that Santa Clause was my uncle! Obviously (spoiler alert) my uncle is not *really* Santa. He was only an actor. Santa is more than a red suit and a white beard. Anyone can wear a costume. I knew my uncle, and although he is a wonderful uncle, he is no Santa Clause. He is an actor. Likewise, sometimes piety isn't really piety, its playacting.

Jesus begins by laying out **the Principle** (vs. 1). In the previous chapter, Jesus showed that sin begins in the heart. That is to say, outward sin begins with inward motivations. Adultery, for example, begins with lust (5:38-42) while murder begins with hatred and anger (5:21-26). Jesus now does the inverse. Righteousness likewise begins in the heart. Outward righteousness does not equal inward righteousness.

True righteousness is born out of motivation to please God, not men. When you give, for example, do it to please the Lord and not others (vs. 2-4). Likewise, when you pray, do it to please the Lord and not others (vs. 5-15). Finally, when you fast, do it to please the Lord and not others (vs. 16-18).

Our actions, therefore, must be judged by the heart. Think about it, are wrong things always wrong? Can they ever be right? If I shove my wife, is it automatically wrong? What if I was saving her from oncoming traffic? Likewise, a kiss is an outward expression of love and trust. It could also be used to betray and beguile (cf. Judas). Charity, prayer, and fasting may outwardly look righteous, but unless they are done with the same motivations, they aren't.

Having laid out the principle, Jesus turns to its **Application** (vs. 2-4). To begin, charity, especially regarding giving to the poor, is clearly commanded by God throughout the Bible (see, for example, Leviticus 19:10, Deuteronomy 15:7, 1 John 3:17-18).

Although charity is good, it is not necessarily righteous when our hearts remain corrupt. Corrupt motivation begins when we want to be “praised by others” (vs. 2). To emphasize his point, Jesus utilizes sarcasm. There is no historical evidence anyone sounded trumpets and had literal parades to draw attention to their lavish gifts. This is an exaggeration of the man who seeks praise through charity.

It is worth mentioning the Jews believed that giving to the poor resulted in salvation. In Tobit 12:8, for example, Jews were told that “charity will save a man from death; it will expiate any sin.” Similarly, the Wisdom of Sirach 3:30 claimed, “As water will quench a flaming fire, so charity will atone for sin.” This gave the average Jew in Jesus’s day the impression that salvation was easier to achieve for the wealthy because they could donate more.

This isn’t unique to First Century Judaism. Even now, we judge people by their charitable giving. We don’t sound trumpets; we hold large checks and change our profile pictures. Jesus calls those who’s generosity is motivated by the praise of others “hypocrites.” The word means “an actor,” “an interpreter,” “one who personates another,” or “one who wears a mask.” A hypocrite is someone whom you see is not the *real* person.

Seek instead to be generous for the glory of God. Meet the needs of others, not the ego. Again, Jesus uses exaggeration to make his point. Our giving should be so secretive (so that God will receive the glory), our left hand should not know what the right hand is doing. This carries the idea of spontaneous giving without any intention of special effort or for showing off.

All that we have is God’s. We have not earned our salvation but were given it. We have not earned our possessions, our families, or our schedules. We were given them. Will we not sacrifice for others as He sacrificed for us?

The wife of Charles Spurgeon, Susannah Thompson, would sell eggs at church every week. Due to Spurgeon’s popularity, they were not poor, and yet his wife refused to give away the eggs their chickens laid even to close relatives. As a result, many thought the Spurgeon’s were greedy and selfish. It wasn’t revealed until after her death that the money she collected from the eggs didn’t go into their bank account but went to support two poor widows at the church. She gave to the glory of God. May we, who have been given the gracious blood of Jesus, do the same.

Matthew 6:5-8, 14-15

A Simple Way to Pray

One of my guilty pleasures is, without a doubt, reading about ignoramus criminals. Their exploits are a special kind of humor for me. I particularly enjoy robbers who choose bad disguises. For example, 2009 in Carroll, IA, 2 intoxicated burglars tried to break into an apartment. For a disguise, they used permanent marker. They were still recognizable and when caught, but they still had the marker on their face. They became known as the Marker Bandits. In Spring 2015, a man robbed a convenience store wearing a clear plastic bag over his head and hand. He was arrested shortly thereafter and sentenced to 15 years in prison. In December 2016, a female bank robber disguised herself by drawing a fake mustache on herself. It worked. She has yet to be caught. My all-time favorite is, without a doubt, Kentucky's own, the Duct Tape bandit. YouTube it.

No one wears a mask in a bank or a convenience store unless they have an alternative motive. For most of us, however, we wear masks all the time to hide what is going on in our heart.

In the opening verse of chapter 6, Jesus laid out his thesis. Religious acts and spiritual discipline don't automatically make us holy and righteous. The issue is motivation. Are we motivated by the approval of others or of God? Jesus begins his infamous discourse on prayer by highlighting how the self-righteous pray. Their motivation is not communion with God, but the envy and approval of others.

Jesus begins by warning against **Performance** (vs. 5). A "hypocrite," describes someone who wears a mask. Today, we would call them actors and imposters. Just as a gifted actor plays is not their character, so too outward acts of piety from the self-righteous are not who they truly are. If we are motivated by a desire to gain approval, then our prayers are empty. God is not impressed by performance any more than we are impressed with a gift given out of routine. He cares about our hearts. Followers of Jesus must be a people of prayer, not to impress others, but to communicate with God.

For the rest of the passage, Jesus offers a helpful guide into how to pray. After correcting our motivations, Jesus recommends the following. First, prayer must be a **PRIORITY** (vs. 6). Just as he suggested with generosity (vs. 2-4), so too Jesus assumes his followers will pray. "When you pray" (not if) implies prayer is a priority. If you want a healthy and vibrant prayer life, prioritize it. Just as your marriage must be a priority for it to thrive, so must prayer. Martin Luther wrote, "As it is the business of tailors to make clothes and of cobblers to mend shoes, so it is the best business of Christians to pray."

Secondly, prayer must be **INTENTIONAL** (vs. 6). We would agree there is a difference between a man who says he's going to get engaged and a man who buys an engagement ring. So too, many people say they want a robust prayer life but fail to take practical steps. Buy a prayer journal, build a prayer closet, or set apart a sacred time of your day when you can be uninterrupted. Read the prayers of the saints or invest in theologically sound, but practical resources to help. Be intentional.

Thirdly, prayer ought to be **SIMPLE** (vs. 7). We are often guilty of overcomplicating prayer. At its simplest, prayer is communion with God. Every father has tried to teach his son how to talk to girls. Whether women know it or not, girls are scary. The prospect of asking a girl out is frightening. Every father encourages his son to simply walk up, look her in the eyes, and be direct and clear. Don't complicate it. Don't overdo it. Prayer is similar. Speak clearly without overcomplication. God understands us even without speaking in KJV English.

Fourthly, prayer ought to be rooted in **FAITH** (vs. 8). Without a doubt, the most debated theological statement of this passage is found here. Why pray if God already knows what we need? The question itself fails to appreciate God's absolute sovereignty and robs a fundamental understanding of prayer as communion. Prayer is confessional and is an admission we are nothing without our Creator-Redeemer. Prayer invites us to enjoy God's good company. His Fatherly sovereignty encourages us to come to him openly and frequently. Regardless, prayer is an act of faith. We beseech the Lord's goodwill knowing that he can and will accomplish all he desires.

Finally, prayer ought to be **PRACTICAL** (vs. 14-15). If prayer is primarily for communion and intimacy, then it ought to change us. After giving the Model Prayer (often called "The Lord's Prayer"), Jesus gives us one final reminder regarding prayer. The closer we grow with God, the more like him we'll become.

Scientists have discovered the common belief that couples start to mimic each other in behavior and even looks overtime. In fact, it's a sign of a healthy relationship. This makes sense. As we grow together, we really become one flesh. The same is true with our relationship with God. As we encounter the God of love, grace, and forgiveness, we learn to be more loving and forgiving. In fact, a sign of a poor spiritual life is the refusal and inability to forgive.

Martin Luther, the great German reformer, was asked by his barber how to pray. Out of that conversation came a short book called *A Simple Way to Pray*. Early in the book, he exhorts his barber and the rest of his readers:

So, a good and attentive barber keeps his thoughts, attention, and yes on the razor and hair and does not forget how far he has gotten with his shaving or cutting. If he wants to engage in too much conversation or let his mind wander or look somewhere else, he is likely to cut his customer's mouth, nose, or even his throat. Thus, if anything is to be done well, it requires the full attention of all one's senses and members . . . How much more does prayer call for concentration and singleness of heart if it is to be a good prayer!

Matthew 6:9-10

The Model Prayer (Part 1)

Experts have long chronicled the countless ways that men and women are different. It is, as many counselors have suggested, as if they are from two different worlds. Some differences are more prevalent whereas others are less so. Consider, for example, how men are more likely to ignore instructions. Men tend to look at a picture and assume they can do it without any help. Although a source of much humor, Christians are guilty of doing the same thing especially when it comes to prayer. Like the Disciples who asked Jesus to teach them how to pray (Luke 11:1), we too often ask the same. Fortunately, Jesus offers a model prayer for us to follow. Commonly called “The Lord’s Prayer,” it is instructions on how to pray. Will we follow it?

Although Jesus’s model prayer is often used in a ritual-like way, that is not its intention. Jesus had previously criticized ritual prayers (see vs. 7) and thus we err when we do the same. Likewise, the Model Prayer is not Jesus’s personal prayer considering his request for forgiveness in verse 12. The Prayer, however, serves as instructions on how we can structure and do the same. Its focus is not on the self but rather on God and the community. Notice that Jesus prays to “our father” and for “our bread” and “our trespasses” as opposed to “my father,” “my bread,” and “my trespasses.” This is the sort of prayer we would expect to find among the poor in spirit, the meek, and the pure in heart. Its desire is God’s glory, our holiness, and the good of others.

The first component of prayer is **Adoration**. The greatest flaw of our approach to prayer is our approach to prayer. We often treat prayer as a cosmic ATM machine whereby we make our request and wait to hear back from God. But notice, prayer becomes a means to an end. It’s about our wants rather than his glory. This is the sort of behavior Jesus has been warning against since vs. 1. A proper motivation for charity, for example, ought to be God’s glory. So too, a proper motivation for prayer ought to be God’s glory. We can either approach prayer as a means to get *from* God or to simply get God. A relationship built solely on fulfilling personal needs is not much of a relationship. Jesus rightly demonstrates that the focus of our prayers ought to be the essence, person, and work of our Creator-Redeemer.

Adoration begins with a focus on GOD’S POSITION. We take the language of the fatherhood of God for granted because of what Jesus taught us. In the Old Testament, the fatherhood of God is not a central theme. When God is referred to as “father,” it is usually by way of analogy and not by way of direct address (see, for example, Psalm 103:13). Jesus changes all of that. Not only did he refer to God as his father but taught his disciples to do the same.

Father helpfully speaks of both Transcendence and Immanence. Transcendence speaks of God as being outside our full experience, perception, or grasp. He is above and beyond us. He is powerful,

mighty, holy, and great. He is up there. We may think of him as sovereign, providential, and holy. Immanence describes how God is with us. He directs us to his knowability, intimacy, and care. The God we worship and pray to is both Transcendent and Immanent and this is where we ought to begin. Notice that Jesus wants us to orientate our prayers away from the self and toward the divine. We are seeking his attention, asking for his presence, approaching him. We are not entitled to such a privilege. Rather, we ought to be in awe of it.

Secondly, Jesus directs us to GOD'S ESSENCE. To *hallow* something is to sanctify it, or to make it holy (see, for example, John 17:17; 1 Corinthians 1:2, 6:11). The bizarre part of this petition is that God's name would be hallowed. But isn't it already? The Seraphim are, right now, declaring "holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty." Isn't God, in his very essence already hallowed, holy, and sanctified? We glorify God by recognizing his holiness in our ongoing effort to become holy. This is the language of reverence.

Finally, Jesus directs us to GOD'S MISSION. The request for God's Kingdom to come and his will to be done does not mean God fails in accomplishing all that he wills. Rather, it is a prayer that God's Kingdom would expand by the triumph of the gospel. It draws us away from the kingdoms of men and onto the Kingdom of God. Our priority should not be what we are building for ourselves, but what God is building.

Once we grasp the centrality of adoration in our prayers, we will naturally turn to **Thanksgiving**. Although many have pointed out the absence of any clear reference to gratitude in the Model Prayer, one should consider how naturally worship feeds thanksgiving. When we contemplate the person and work of Christ, how can we respond with anything other than thanksgiving.

Adoration ought to be central to our prayers. Failure to do so robs of the awesome privilege of approaching the very throne of God. Do not lose that perspective. Related to Adoration is Thanksgiving and Scripture clearly demands we express gratitude in our prayer life (see, 1 Thessalonians 5:17-18; John 11:41). Adoration fuels gratitude.

When our prayers are only supplication, they become inwardly focused. Re-examine your prayers. Are they only "me, me, me?" If so, then practice both Adoration and Thanksgiving. Self-oriented prayers fuel entitlement and insecurity. You'll attach God's fatherly love with getting what you want. That is not a healthy relationship. Adoration and Thanksgiving fuel love and intimacy with our Maker. Don't simply seek things from God, seek God. You already have enough in him.

A 4-year-old was trying to learn the Lord's Prayer primarily by listening at church each Sunday. On one Sunday he could be heard above all the others, praying, "Our Father who art in Heaven, I know you know my name." But do we know his? Let our prayers be an opportunity of praise and intimacy.

Matthew 6:11-13

The Model Prayer (Part 2)

Can you solve the following math problem: what is $3 \times 4 + 1 \times 4$. In January 2019, a 911 dispatcher in Lafayette, IN received a strange call from a little boy who was struggling to solve the formula. The dispatcher graciously showed the young boy much patience and kindness, but little has been said about the young boy. Would you be so bold as to call 911? I hope not! But at the same time, there is something incredible about what he did. He had a problem and he turned to the person he had been told could help him when he needed it. You have a heavenly Father who offers the same.

In the opening half of the Lord's Prayer, Jesus explored the components of adoration and thanksgiving in our prayers. The latter half explores two other important ingredients of prayer. The first is **Supplication** (vs. 11). The simple line, "Give us this day our daily bread" (vs 11) has two applications. The first is for *Physical Requests*. Jesus encourages us to bring all our needs, including daily sustenance, to God. Remember that Jesus was preaching to a culture that didn't take food for granted. Most citizens woke up not knowing if they would eat.

It is not an accident Jesus uses the word *bread*. It is generic and common enough to describe our physical needs in general, but at the same time, bread was perhaps the most common food source as demonstrated in the biblical narrative. Ultimately, Jesus wants us to genuinely trust the Lord will supply our needs. Through prayer, we learn to trust less in our own ability and his provision (see Matthew 6:25-26, 7:9-11). Notice the emphasis on the word "daily." Preachers have long suggested we should "pray for our needs, not our greeds." Living by faith means that God has taken care of everything and will take care of everything. Let us focus on the day.

Such requests do not, however, diminish the biblical requirement to work or to use wisdom. Ultimately, supplication is an act of humility. In prayer, we confess our own inadequacies. What we need is God's sovereign care to shine upon us.

The second application of supplication includes *Spiritual Requests*. Throughout the Bible, food in general and bread in particular are metaphors for our spiritual needs. Consider how often food is associated with temptation and sin (Eve and the fruit, Esau surrendering his birthright for soup, the Jews complaining in the wilderness, Jesus tempted to turn stones into bread, etc.). In each story, food reveals man's struggle to control their appetite.

For many of us, the hardest part of losing weight is not exercising (we can always go for a long walk), but dieting. The same is true with our spiritual lives. Outward acts of piety and ritual are easy, but self-control and godliness are difficult. Most are either spiritually starved or spiritually malnourished. Some are "hungering and thirsting for righteousness" but have been eaten an

unhealthy spiritual diet while others are starving but don't know where to look. Either way, what we need is for the Lord to provide for us spiritually.

The final component of prayer is **Confession** (vs. 12-13). This is a continuation of addressing our spiritual needs. If adoration properly orientates our prayers toward our Creator, confession orientates our prayers toward our Redeemer. Your greatest need in prayer is addressing sin. It requires us to do three things. First, we must simply *Confess Our Sins* (vs. 12a). Jesus assumes his disciples are sinners and will continue to struggle to crucify the flesh. Being the case, the proper response is to confess our sins and receive the cleansing work of Christ and then walk in freedom. Forgiveness is not a license to sin again, but liberty from the guilt and shame that comes with it. The only way to address our own evil and wickedness is to cry out to God for grace, healing, cleansing, and forgiveness.

Secondly, we must *Forgive Others* (vs. 12b). One of the main reasons we ought to seek God's grace is to practice God's grace. Notice that Jesus assumes that his disciples forgive those who sin against them (see Matthew 5:23-26, 6:14-15). Perhaps the best kept secret to spiritual renewal is learning to both receive God's forgiveness and extend forgiveness. Pray the Lord will guide you in our spiritual duty to forgive and reconcile.

Finally, confession involves *Acknowledging Our Weaknesses* (vs. 13). The language common in our translations is misleading. God does not tempt us (James 1:13-15). A better reading could be, "do not let us succumb to temptation." In sports, knowing your opponent is as important as knowing your own team. The reason coaches watch film and analyze their opponent is to prepare them. It is imperative we know ourselves (including our weaknesses) and our enemy. Notice that we are not praying to escape temptation but overcome it. Such a prayer acknowledges that only our Father is the one who can truly protect us.

Hannibal was the Carthaginian general that almost single handedly prevented the Romans from becoming a powerful empire. Despite their best efforts, the Romans couldn't beat Hannibal. His secret was elephants in battle. It wasn't until Roman general Scipio Africanus came that Hannibal was defeated. Among other strategies, General Africanus decided to startle the elephants during the battle by blasting trumpets causing them to retreat in fear. Our enemies (the world, the flesh, and the devil) know it doesn't take much for us to retreat. What we need is for the God of Armies, the Lord of Hosts, to stand by our side and fight for us. What we need is prayer.

Matthew 6:19-24

Investing Wisely

What is the worse financial investment anyone has ever made? In 1979, Magic Johnson was drafted by the LA Lakers after winning a national championship with Michigan State. Three shoe companies approached him: Converse, Adidas, and Nike. Growing up poor, Magic chose the company that had the best track record for basketball, had already signed Larry Bird and other superstars, and offered the most money. Nike, a new company known for their running shoes, offered less money but stock. Had Magic signed with Nike, he would have made (starting out) about \$100,000 a year which was good money, but nothing compared to Converse. Nike stock sat at \$.18 a share in 1979. It is now at over \$105. Such an investment would have resulted in an additional \$5 billion.

What you invest in matters and says a lot about who you are. Some make poor decisions; others make wise ones. If that is true with financial investments, how much more so with spiritual ones?

Jesus utilizes three metaphors for us to consider our spiritual investments. The first involves **the Heart** (vs. 19-21). Jesus warns of laying “up for yourselves treasures” on earth as opposed to treasures in heaven. In other words, what we invest in matters. We can either invest in temporary goods that are prone to decay and thievery or invest in eternal goods that remain secure.

This has been the running theme of Jesus. In Matthew 5:17-48, Jesus showed how unrighteousness stems from the heart. Similarly, in Matthew 6:1-18, Jesus showed how true righteousness stems from the heart. What motivates hypocritical piety is the pursuit of validation. We seek the approval of man over God. We treasure what depreciates.

Jesus highlights three common commodities in the first century. The first are GARMENTS. Like the modern world, fashion was a source of wealth in the ancient world (cf. Joseph and the coat of many colors). The problem with garments is they are easily destroyed by “moths.” A second commodity was GRAINS. Given the agricultural context of the New Testament, the amount of grain one raised was a means of wealth. The problem with grain, however, is the danger of vermin. Although most translations use “rust,” the word means “to eat” (see John 4:32, 6:27; Romans 14:17) perhaps referencing creatures who consume before it can be harvested. The final commodity was GOLD which attracts thieves. Jesus’s point is clear. To invest in earthly things is risky and will disappoint in the end. We should rather invest in eternal things.

Just as living for depreciating commodities is foolish, so living for the approval of man is equally foolish. Jesus’s primary concern thus far has been our heart. Sin stems from the heart as does righteousness. If your heart is in the wrong place, you are a foolish investor. Investing in worldly pleasure, power, or the approval of others is a foolish investment.

Years after Magic Johnson's foolish decision, Michael Jordan took the deal with Nike that came with stock and is now one of the wealthiest athletes in the world. When Charles Barkley signed with Nike, Jordan told Barkley to take a similar deal. Barkley has reported he has made about 10 times more money in that choice than he otherwise would have made.

Investments matter. What you do with your money matters. What you invest your heart in matters more.

The second metaphor regards **the Eye** (vs. 22-23). The themes of light and the eye are not new in the Sermon on the Mount (see Matthew 5:14-16, 29). Ultimately, however, the eye is the organ of focus. Keep your eyes on Christ.

This is the direction Jesus takes us next. Beginning in verse 25, Jesus shows how anxiety is the art of focusing on what we cannot control instead of focusing on the One who can. In Matthew 7:1-3, Jesus addresses the speck one "sees" in their brother's eye while being blind to the branch in their own. Finally, Jesus exhorts his listeners to ask, "seek," and knock (Matthew 7:7).

What matters is our focus. If our eyes are on the wrong things, we will suffer spiritually. Stay focused on Jesus and his righteousness.

Finally, Jesus explores **the Soul**. By definition, slaves have one master. Remember that in Jesus's time, slaves were everywhere. Estimates vary, but scholars guess around 10-20% of the Roman population were slaves. Of the estimated population of 50 million during the time of Jesus, that would mean 5-10 million of them were slaves. Slaves were the exclusive property of a single master. Therefore, the scenario Jesus describes is ludicrous. That's the point. Loyalty to Christ and to our idols is a fool's errand.

Imagine if it were possible to serve two masters. Does it not make sense that you will prefer one over the other? So too, stop trying to have one foot in righteousness and another foot in wickedness. Stop trying to worship the Savior while holding fast to your idols.

While Jesus specifically mentions the idol of money, other false gods can be highlighted. Like the Israelites of the Old Testament our loyalties are stretched between the True and Living God and false idols. Of all the available idols, post-Christian America has 5 prominent deities including Self, Sex, Stuff, Science, and State.

My least favorite part of working in retail was inventory. It was a stressful time everyone hated. But it was crucial to our well-being. Spiritual inventories can be just as frustrating and equally crucial. What are you investing in? Will it last into eternity? What are you focused on? Is it true righteousness? What are the deepest desires of your heart? Is it the Lord's glory?

Matthew 6:25-34

Ain't Nothing to Worry About

One does not need a handful of statistics to know that despite American wealth, influence, and opportunity, we are paralyzed by stress, worry, anxiety, and depression. This isn't a new phenomenon. Life has always been difficult and knowing how to handle it can be mysterious. As chapter 6 of Matthew concludes, Jesus addresses the spiritual issue of anxiety head on. With Jesus's help, let us explore a few practical points of application regarding this issue.

First, consider **The Surprise** regarding anxiety. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has been concerned with the source of things. Previously, he showed us the importance of the heart, the eyes, and the soul (Matthew 6:19-24). The biggest surprise in addressing anxiety is its connection to Pride. CS Lewis is attributed with the quote, "Humility is not less of ourselves but thinking of ourselves less." This is a crucial error in false humility. In an effort to not be prideful we utilize language that is anything but humble.

Notice who is at the center of attention in Jesus's discussion. Read the pronouns in verse 25, "what *you* will eat or what *you* will drink, nor about *your* body, what *you* will put on." Nothing will trigger your anxiety more than pride. Often, we overthink conversations and events throughout the day and from our past. We replay the tone we had, the words we used, or how awkward we felt we were. As we replay the scenario, our anxiety builds up. "Why am I so awkward?" "No wonder no one likes me." "Did I ever get that food out of my teeth?" "If I knew they were going to be there, I would have worn something better." "I'm destined to be a cat person forever." Notice that the center of that conversation is the self.

Anxiety convinces us we are more important than we are. I have noticed an increase in social anxiety among young Americans. Increasingly, they can't order food at a restaurant. Why is that? They overanalyze every part of the situation. To our surprise, the waitress does not care about our "uh's," our indecisiveness, our choices, our hair, or our voice. What they want is for us to order and then to take our money. We are the one thinking about ourselves. They aren't!

If you want to be free from anxiety, choose humility. Notice that Jesus directs our attention elsewhere. In verse 26, he tells us to look at the birds who do not sow, reap, or gather, and yet God takes care of them. Likewise, look at the flowers of the field (vs. 28) who are clothed beautifully without chasing the latest fashion. Jesus is utilizing a classic greater/lesser argument which shows that if God takes care of them, he'll take care of us.

Secondly, consider **The Source** of our anxiety. Anxiety is an attack on two major theological truths. The first is an attack on God as both Creator and Sustainer. The doctrine of Creation is crucial to

our spiritual health. Scripture is clear that God creates without error or mistake. Every brushstroke in the cosmos and every atom on earth is placed exactly where he desired. That is true for you and me. You are not a mistake. To suggest otherwise is a theological statement. Your existence is an intentional act of God's plan. Act like it.

Secondly, God is both Sovereign and Provident. As our Sovereign Lord, he is in absolute control. Nothing escapes his gaze. As our Providential God, all of history is under his authority and is headed toward a climactic end resulting in his eternal glory manifesting throughout his creation. You are part of that sovereign story. Why do we trust God for heavenly provisions but not for our daily ones? We believe that God redeems, prepares heaven for us, and holds us in his hands. And yet, we struggle to trust him in our daily lives. We worry about tomorrow while anxious about today. We're paralyzed by the decisions our kids make, monthly bills, bank accounts, and reputations. Why worry about earthly things and not heavenly ones? We no more control our heavenly destiny than we do our daily needs.

A third point of application from Jesus's discussion regards **The Significance**. Anxiety comes when we elevate the unimportant and demote the important. Jesus asks an interesting question, "Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" (vs. 25b). On surface, it may sound like Jesus thinks necessities aren't important. Obviously, food, clothing, and shelter are priorities. We can't survive without them. At the same time, giving our full attention to them at the cost of our faith stirs anxiety. Anxiety doesn't feed the hungry, keep us healthy, or clothe the naked. Nor will anxiety secure joy, contentment, peace, or love.

Finally, consider **The Search**. In verses 32-33, Jesus contrasts the Gentiles (that is, non-believers outside the covenant grace of God who do not look to him for all their needs, both physically and spiritually) and believers who seek for peace. The "Gentiles" do not look outside of themselves for help, but inside themselves. No wonder they are so miserable. They seek after things that are not cures for anxiety – fame, fortune, power, influence, intimacy, and honor. Disciples of Christ, on the other hand, *seek* God's Kingdom and his righteousness *first*. In so doing, the Lord takes care of the rest.

Seek Christ. Seek his wisdom. Seek his glory. Seek his Kingdom. And let worry bother someone else.

In an article on *Christianity Today*, the author tells of their experience as a swimming instructor who spent an enormous amount of time trying to teach children to float. She would tell them to put their ears in the water and their belly buttons out of it. "When I count to 2," she would instruct, "you won't feel my hands underneath you, but they're still there." As soon as she'd say, "two," most of the children would frantically jerk their knees toward their chin and then flail their arms causing them to sink.

The key to floating is assuming a posture of rest, but when people panic, they sink. The same is true with worry and anxiety. Assume a posture of humble faith knowing that God has you. Let him worry about the water, the weather, the bills, the kids, the deadlines, and the rest.

Matthew 7:1-6

The Most (Mis)used Verse in the Bible

The most quoted verse in all the Bible is not John 3:16. It's not even Philippians 4:13. It is Matthew 7:1. Our overuse (and abuse) of this singular verse is a great example of what happens when we read the Bible with America in the forefront and 1st century Judea in the background. Let us try to understand what Jesus meant so that we can understand what Jesus means.

Jesus begins with the **Denouncement** (vv. 1). What does Jesus mean by "judge not." Most assume Jesus is against Moral Evaluations. In Monopoly, there is a handy card you can win called a "Get out of Jail Free" card. This verse is often used in a similar way. It's used as a weapon of judgment against threats of judgment. When we don't like what someone has said to us, we play this card.

This approach has several problems. First, we all make necessary moral judgements. Who do you let babysit your children and how do you decide? You make moral judgments. Imagine if a sketchy looking stranger asked for your phone number or email password. Are you going to give it? Secondly, Jesus repeatedly makes judgements. Look closely at the Sermon on the Mount especially in Matthew 5:19, 48, 6:1, 2, 5, 16, 7:21-23. Later, Jesus makes clear judgements in Matthew 15:7-9 and the temple cleansing in Matthew 21. It is odd to suggest that Jesus condemns all moral evaluations when he repeatedly does the same. Finally, Jesus demands discernment (see Matthew 7:15-16) which requires moral evaluations.

Ultimately, weaponizing this verse is an act of judgment. Ironically, "don't judge me!" is a judgment that you were being judged. It comes with condemnation.

The real meaning of this single verse is that Jesus condemns hypocrisy. The dominant concern of Jesus, thus far, has been how religious hypocrisy robs us of deep intimacy with God and from living the blessed life. Repeatedly, Jesus has had the religious elites in mind. In Matthew 5:17-48, Jesus shows how wickedness stems from our hearts. Likewise, in Matthew 6:1-18, Jesus shows how righteousness stems from the heart.

Jesus is concerned how legalism fuels hypocrisy. While condemning violence, the hypocrite has hate in his own heart. While condemning adultery, he has lust in his heart. While praising his own public piety, he is inwardly corrupt. This is a dominant theme throughout the Gospels, especially in Matthew (see, for example, the seven woes).

Although it is easy to condemn the Pharisees of Jesus's day, we could easily look into our own spiritual mirrors. Are we guilty of complaining about public discourse while leaving nasty comments behind an anonymous username? Or do we ever say, "I'll pray for you," but never pray? Do we ever

complain about the state of marriage and the family culturally while not prioritizing ourselves? Do we ever brag about our church attendance while ignoring our treatment of the waitress immediately after? Religious and moral hypocrisy severely stains the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, Jesus **Defines** judgmental hypocrisy (vs. 2-5). Jesus does not denounce judgment without also defining it for us. To judge someone by a certain standard is to invite others to judge you by that same standard. The standard by which we make judgments is applied to us. This is the practice of humbly applying our moral standards first to ourselves.

Jesus then illustrates his definition by offering a parable of two men. One has a small speck in his eye whereas the other man suffers from an entire tree trunk in his (vs. 3-5). This parable is a great example of Jesus's use of humor and exaggeration. What is missed in this brief parable is how Jesus doesn't condemn helping the man with the speck but insisting on removing the trunk *first*. It would be uncaring to ignore the man with the speck, but due to the other man's more serious condition, he is unable to help.

Remove what is in your eye, Jesus demands. Do what is necessary to clear your sight so that together we can all see better. Indifference to sin is unacceptable especially in our own lives. A similar example can be found on airplanes where we are instructed to first put the mask over our face before doing the same for those around us. If you want to make the world a better place, prioritize your own growth in holiness. Doing so allows us to see better and to serve better.

Ultimately, this passage is often misused when we eagerly apply it to others. Perhaps the best use of it is to look in our spiritual mirror. Let us humbly examine our own heart and lives and begin the important work of removing what's in our eyes, what corrupts our hearts, and stains our souls. When we all do that necessary work, we'll be ready to grow closer to Christ with the help of each other.

Matthew 7:7-12

Ask. Seek. Knock

Let's talk about grammar. English sentences follow a specific order: subject, verb, direct object. Variations of that pattern are rare but not extant. Consider Matthew 7:7, a verse well known by many Bible readers. "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." What is the subject of these three clauses? Who is asking? Who is seeking? Who is knocking? Likewise, what is the direct object of these clauses. What is the subject asking, seeking, or knocking? This grammatical mystery makes the interpretation difficult, but not impossible.

First, consider **The Pursuit** (vv. 7). Scholars have long reminded biblical readers that "a text without a context is a pretext for a proof-text." The same is true for verse 7. The Sermon on the Mount is a well-structured passage which means that the command in verse 7 fits the broader argument of the sermon. The main thesis of the sermon regards the secret to the blessed life found in Christ and enjoyed in God's Kingdom. The blessed life is not one of religion or rebellion, but one sold out to Christ, his Kingdom, and his righteousness. Those who live for God's glory enjoy the blessed life whereas those who live for their own glory or for the approval of others will not discover the secret to the blessed life. This passage fits squarely within that broader argument.

The structure of this verse may be grammatically odd, but not unique. Most English sentences follow the Subject, Verb, Direct Object, but not all of them. Imagine if someone was standing in the middle of the road and a bus was heading toward them, I wouldn't say, "Dear sir, move away from the bus." I would say, "Move!" Beginning a sentence with a verb, though odd for the English speaker, places the emphasis on the verbs – Ask, Seek, Knock.

These words are not arbitrary. Notice that they are sequential increasing in intensity. They are also synonymous. They are all terms meaning "to pursue." The Greek also emphasizes their persistence. Translations could render verse 7 as saying, *keep* asking, *keep* seeking, and *keep* knocking.

This means that the blessed life is not automatic. I came across a video featuring two friends in a conversation. The first noted they didn't feel good and were lacking energy and motivation. Their friend then asked a series of questions. "Have you drank water today? Are you getting rest? When was your last vacation? How much time do you spend on your phone?" The point of the video is that health is not something that happens. It isn't automatic.

The same is true with our spiritual lives. When was the last time you really read your Bible? How often do you pray? How consistent has your worship been? Do you practice the spiritual disciplines? Do you regularly repent of your sin? Have you ever shared your faith? Have you forgiven others and reconciled with them? The blessed life is available to all who want it, but it will never be enjoyed by those who fail to prioritize the God of all blessings. It's not an accident that these verbs are not

unique in the Sermon on the Mount. We've come across them before. If you want God's best, keep pursuing him.

Secondly, consider **The Promise** (vv. 8-11). Jesus doesn't just drop this verb-dominated proverb and then move on. He assures us that God honors such pursuit. Notice that Jesus essentially says the same thing in verse 8 as he did in verse 7. The difference is that the emphasis is moved from the verbs (ask, seek, knock) to the direct objects (receives, finds, answers). The one who asks *will* receive. The one who seeks *will* find. The one who knocks *will* open.

This is illustrated in verses 9-10. The description of God as Father is prevalent in the Sermon on the Mount. This illustration is no different. No father would give his hungry child a stone or a serpent. Without a doubt, every father would move heaven and earth to feed their children real food like bread and fish. Not only is the role of the father an important detail, but so is the role of the son. He *asks* his father for bread. He *ask*s his father for fish.

This leads to the application of assurance. Even though human fathers are "evil," morally speaking, they naturally know they must provide for their children and feed them when they asks, how much more so will our Heavenly Father honor our requests? This is, again, a greater/lesser argument. If mere humans can grasp this basic premise, how much more so can we trust God to fulfill it?

We error when we seek the blessed life in others, through others, or with others apart from the Lord. If you think people are the secret to the good life, you are going to be disappointed. Therefore, keep asking, keep seeking, and keep knocking, the things of God. It will be worth it.

Jesus concludes by considering **The Passion** (vv. 12). If the command to ask, seek, and knock fits the broader argument Jesus has been establishing, it also fits the immediate context. In verses 1-6, Jesus explored hypocritical criticism. The critic is one that is aware of the flaws of others while simultaneously blind to their own. They are well-aware of their brother's speck while ignorant of their own tree trunk.

Critics live miserable lives. Have you not noticed how rare legalists smile? They are busy trying to whip everyone into shape. The same can be said to the culturally empowered who are equally religious and equally legalistic. The citizen of God's king lives by a different creed.

The Golden Rule, given in verse 12, is not unique to Jesus. Writers like Rabbi Hillel, Confucius, and Stoics all gave their versions of the Golden Rule. Most of these examples come from a negative perspective. Don't do something to someone because they'll turn around and do it to you. This was the basic foreign policy of both the USA and USSR during the Cold War. Neither wanted to launch nukes first in the fear that the other side would do the same.

Jesus, however, suggests the opposite. *Do* to others what you want them to do to you ... even if they do not reciprocate. This is Kingdom living. This is gospel love. This is the secret to the blessed life. The critic wants to be perceived as better, wise, and holier seeking validation through their superiority. The Blessed already have the validation of God himself because he is the sort of loving father who gives to his children who asks, seeks, and knocks. Therefore, the blessed children of God love with abandonment. When we ask, we receive. When we seek, we find. When we knock, we open. And then, we give, we go, we bless.

Matthew 7:13-14

The Road Less Traveled

What do people hate most about Christianity? No doubt one could do a historical survey and find countless issues. During the Enlightenment, for example, miraculous claims came under assault. During Modernism, doctrines like creation and the veracity of Scripture were attacked. In our postmodern society, truth claims and moral statements on life, sexuality, and what it means to be human are challenged. But the single issue that people hate most about Christianity is its claim of exclusivity. We believe that Jesus is the only hope of salvation.

This is clear throughout history. The most significant threat against Israel as they conquered the Promised Land was syncretism. Their constant compromising with the Canaanites led them away from the Lord. When Alexander the Great conquered much of the West, he brought with him Hellenism. Greek culture shaped language, societal norms, and religion. The Romans adopted a similar policy but instead of spreading Hellenism, they spread syncretism. When they'd conquered, they would adopt their gods assuming they would adopt Roman gods. The Jews refused to the point the Romans burned Jerusalem to the ground.

Christians had the same problem. By refusing to worship their pantheon of gods, they were considered outcasts. Prior to their executions, they were asked to recant and to sacrifice to the gods. The Romans didn't mind their faith in a resurrected Messiah, what they didn't like was their refusal to Romanize their faith.

This is still the case today. Would Christianity be constantly mocked and threatened in the West if it just went along? Its claim of exclusivity makes it an enemy.

Jesus begins exploring **Two Directions**. The first metaphor Jesus gives regards two gates described as *narrow* on the one hand and *wide* on the other. Without a doubt, there is an abundance of literature to connect the easy road with immoral living and the narrow road with piety. To be fair, such applications are legitimate. This is a reasonable and tempting conclusion. We are more tempted to look like the world and to go along with its morals than we are to choose godliness. For example, I am unaware of many young men tempted away from pornography or vain glory or pride and toward generosity, prayer, and unconditional love.

But this passage fits within the broader argument of the Sermon on the Mount. Throughout this sermon, Jesus has been contrasting two Kingdoms: the Kingdom of Man on the one hand and the Kingdom of God on the other. Consider what he has said about each. The Kingdom of Man is characterized by hypocrisy (5:17-48), validation seeking (6:1-18), and anxiety (6:25-34). This is not the blessed life. The Kingdom of God, however, is characterized by inner righteousness (5:17-28), deep intimacy with the Lord (6:1-18), spiritual health, (6:19-34), and love. This is the blessed life.

He brings it all together by contrasting the two roads. First, he contrasts the easy and difficult road. The way of Man's Kingdom is described as easy while the way of God's Kingdom is described as hard. The former road masks unrighteousness, for example, rather than addressing the evil in our own heart. Likewise, not committing adultery is significantly easier than warring against lust. On the surface, living for the validation of others is easier than the validation of the Lord.

Ultimately, the road is easy because we are welcome to carry as much luggage as we want – sin, pride, jealousy, discontentment, and resentment. On the surface, that is our preferred road. In contrast, the way of God's Kingdom is hard. It requires us to address our broken & wicked hearts. We must confront our proclivity toward lust, greed, bitterness, and anger. This is difficult work.

Jesus also draws a contrast between the Broad and the Narrow roads. With the advent of mapping technology, we choose the route that is the easiest and quickest to drive. We do the same thing with life. We all want an easy life. We tell ourselves that the easy life requires us to go along. Why take the gravel, country road when a 5-lane interstate is available? Few want to travel down the difficult road. Few are on the road and the way can be rather bumpy. The Way of the Kingdom requires real work.

Finally, Jesus draws our attention to **Two Destinations**. In the 1990's classic sitcom, "Family Matters," Eddie and his friend, Waldo, are traveling to Disney Land to meet with their family. Hours into the drive, Eddie is losing patience. Why isn't he seeing signs for Florida? Waldo looks at the map and says they should soon be passing "Kanadah." "Kanadah?" asks Eddie. "Waldo, that's Canada! We've been traveling the wrong distance for hours." Just like traveling north won't lead to Florida, so too, we cannot reach the blessed life via the broad road of destruction.

Once again, Jesus uses contrast. To begin, Jesus shows the way of man's kingdom leads to destruction. Although the broad road *appears* to be easy allowing us to ignore our heart while condemning the actions of others, it will not lead to the Blessed Life (see Proverbs 14:12). Wickedness, idolatry, hypocrisy, cultural acceptance, and neighborly validation never lead to the blessed life.

Contrast that to how God's Kingdom leads to blessing. This difficult, narrow road leads to blessing by shredding our hypocrisy, pride, anger, bitterness, and anxiety. In its place lay assurance, peace, righteousness, and love. That is the Blessed Life.

In summary, the Road of Destruction leads us to the self and there is no blessing to be found there. The Road of Blessing leads us to Christ and in him is all we long for. CS Lewis wrote, "Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ, and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in."

My wife and I, one day, will take a particular vacation. We will set out without knowing where we are going. West? East? North? South? We'll stop where we want, go where we want, and do what we want. That works for vacation. It's a terrible strategy for living one's life. Where are you going? What road are you on? Does it lead to Christ? If not, it won't lead to blessing.

Matthew 7:15-23

My ... What Big Teeth You Have!

Before the digital revolution, getting directions was an interesting experience. Compare how men and women gave directions. Stereotypically, men shred road numbers and specific distances whereas women referred to landmarks. Likewise, compare how small towns gave directions. Insiders prefer to reference the countless small, rural towns nearby and will often use road names (as opposed to road numbers).

What mattered the most wasn't *how* one was given directions, but that they were accurate and good. In the previous passage, Jesus used the metaphor of two roads. One road is narrow and leads to blessing while the other road is broad and leads to destruction. He is pleading with the reader to choose the correct path. One of the great impediments to choosing the correct road regards who gives us directions. If we listen to the wrong voices, we'll never get to where we're going.

Now that we are squarely in the concluding remarks of the Sermon on the Mount, we are sensing a change in Jesus's tone. He has been encouraging us to choose the way of the Kingdom of God. He has demonstrated for us how God's Kingdom produces God's blessing. Now, however, he warns the reader. If you want to avoid the wrong path, don't be fooled by wrong teachers.

Jesus begins by warning us to **Beware of Dangerous Wolves** (vs. 15-20). I suspect the worse part of being a mailman or a door-to-door salesman is the dogs. The sign "Beware of Dog" is usually enough to keep people at bay. My parents have a dog that likes to bark at cars and visitors, but strangely not when they are arriving, but when they're leaving. She loves to ride in cars and so when you head toward your car to leave, she goes crazy. She is not the best guard dog.

Regardless, such signs are necessary. They are a warning for everyone who might venture on our property. Jesus does the same here. In verse 13, he invited the reader to "enter," but now he warns the reader to "beware" (vs. 15). As you begin this journey it is important we listen to faithful teachers, not to false ones.

Jesus proceeds to give us 2 metaphors to illustrate his point. First FALSE TEACHERS ARE LIKE WOLVES (vs. 15). In an agrarian culture where sheep are ubiquitous, the metaphor of sheep/wolves would have made much sense. Wolves are the natural predator of sheep. Although wolves are stealthy and strategic, these imaginary wolves are more innovative. They *look* like sheep, *sound* like sheep, and *behave* like sheep. But remove the mask and you'll discover they are not only fraudulent, but deadly.

Secondly, Jesus says FALSE TEACHERS ARE LIKE ROTTEN TREES (vs. 16). The illustration is simple. Apple trees do not produce watermelon nor do rose bushes do not produce Whoppers from Burger King.

Put together, these metaphors encourage us to judge biblical teaching by considering both orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Regarding the former, truth is measured by the Word of God. This should be an obvious point, but given our woeful ignorance of Scripture, few are qualified to measure what they hear with what is true. As a result, many believers, infant in their understanding of the faith, are led astray by dangerous teachers. It is imperative for Christians to be grounded in sound doctrine and biblical truth.

Likewise, teaching should be faithful to orthopraxy. While some wolves are well disguised, their fruit will become evident. Therefore, when teachers begin to justify unrighteousness, read the sign. Beware!

Secondly, Jesus tells us to **Beware of Disguised Works** (vs. 21-23). In this final scene, Jesus shows he is unimpressed with showy acts of religion. Consider the resume of the condemned: they prophecy, exorcise demons, and perform incredible miracles in Christ's name. Regardless, Jesus shows his lack of interest. He is not condemning these acts in of themselves. He will perform them himself as will his Disciples. The problem is that the condemned trust in their religious acts. They tie their redemption to their resume.

What good is prophecy if you hate your neighbor? What good is warring against unclean spirits when we succumb to temptation? What good are miracles if we choose hypocrisy? The world will know we are Christians, not by our conservatism or by our political power or by how loud we scream. The world will know we are Christians by our love which stems from redeemed hearts.

The San Francisco Gate published a humorous article reporting on a woman who nurtured a succulent for two years before realizing it was made out of plastic. "If someone else tried to water my succulent, I would get so defensive," she wrote on Facebook. All along, the plant pretended to be alive, never revealing its true nature.

She did notice the plant didn't grow as expected despite giving it the right amount of water and sunlight. She thought she was doing well since the plant never developed blackened tips or discolored leaves. It was the perfect houseplant. When she went to transplant it from its original container, she expected to find a ball of packed roots in the container, she instead discovered no roots at all.

"Tried my hardest to keep it looking it's best, and it's completely plastic!" she wrote. "How did I not know this. I pull it from the container it's sitting on Styrofoam with sand glued to the top! I feel like these last two years have been a lie."

Admittedly, it is funny to imagine nursing a fake plant for two years. It is tragic to consider a life lived shaped by false gospels and fake religion. Let us follow the way of Christ via the cross. That is the key to the narrow road that leads to blessing.

Matthew 7:24-29

So Sweet a Foundation

My son loved Legos. His favorite thing was to build a tower as high as possible. The problem was that he lacked the patience necessary to build a high and strong tower because he didn't want to first build a firm foundation.

Normally, we approach the biblical text in sequential order. That is to say, we prefer to explore verse 1 before exploring verse 2. In this passage, however, the narrative conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount provides necessary insight into the interpretation of this final parable. After finishing the sermon, Jesus stepped down and Matthew gives us the response of the crowd. They "were astonished at his teaching" (vs. 28). The word translated "astonished" (or "amazed" in other translations) comes from a compound Greek word literally meaning "to strike out" (not in the baseball sense). More specifically, it means "to expel by a blow" or even "to be blown away." Interestingly, this word is almost always used in the context of Jesus's teaching (see Matthew 13:54, 19:25, 22:33). Clearly, the crowd heard from Jesus something unique and mesmerizing.

What is most striking is not their amazement, but their lack of action. Matthew tells us they were amazed, not converted; astonished but not repentant; moved but not changed; mesmerized but not transformed. Throughout this sermon, Jesus has called out the entire religious system of Israel along with its leaders. They were leading Israel toward the path of destruction. They were hypocrites who performed for an audience but remained wicked on the inside. On the day of judgment, they will stand before Jesus and marvel that their rituals and religious accomplishments weren't enough. And their only response was to be impressed? In other words, they were building their houses on sand.

To understand the parable, let us begin with the similarities between the two houses, the two builders, and the two destinies. They, for example, shared the same knowledge equally capable of building in according to the local building code regulations. They build their homes in the same neighborhood meaning that whatever affects one house will affect the other. They also share the same experiences. By the looks of everything, these two builders looked the same. What's different is deeper than the superficial.

Although the men had much in common, they couldn't be more different. First, **both men hear, but only one obeys.** The obedient man is described as "wise." To have intellectual knowledge isn't enough. Faith is more than adopting a series of doctrines or truth statements. Unless theology directs our lives, it is an empty theology. Unless the gospel transforms us from the inside, we remain empty. The refusal to obey Christ leads to the foolish works of the foolish man.

Secondly both men build, but only one does so wisely. Its not *that* they built, but *how* they built. The wise man built his house upon the firm foundation of a rock. The foolish man, however, had no firm foundation. What must have been going through the foolish man's mind? Was he so naïve as to think that the water would never rise, the rain would never fall, or that the weather would never get ugly? Perhaps he's naïve ("that will never happen to me") or wanted to take the easy route. Either way, he is a fool.

Finally, **both men suffer, but only one perseveres**. There is debate about what the rock represents. Is it God? Is it Christ? Is it Scripture? What is it exactly? The Kingdom of God via the gospel of Jesus Christ. The house of the wise man is built on the rock of the gospel. That gospel is not only belief, but repentance. A repentance that shows itself in obedience. The gospel is more than just saying we love Jesus but are led toward humble obedience. This man built his house on the true gospel whereby he didn't just admire Jesus or just go through the motions of religion but submitted everything to Christ. He heard, listened, understood, and obeyed. And because of his faith, life, & worldview is shaped by the gospel he's unshakable.

The rain, floods, and wind certainly represent life's many trials and hardships. And notice that both men experience them. This demonstrates that faith is not bubble wrap against hardship. We all suffer. We do not all persevere. But none of that matters to the Rock Man. Since he is firmly planted in the gospel of repentance and obedience, he knows that God is still on His throne, God is still good, God is still in control, God is still a saving God.

The ultimate question is, what foundation is your life built on? Is it the gospel of God's Kingdom or on the hopeless journey of the self? Some reject Christ completely and live a life of misery and aimlessness. Others have cheapened the gospel by buying into an easy believism. It is a pretty house with no foundation. Some have built a precipice of religion that lacks genuine conversion and repentance. All will crumble and fall.

But if your house is built on the rock of the gospel, you will not be free of hardship, but will be able to stand firm when it comes because your focus is not on yourself, but on the glory of God. Moments of trials are moments for God to be glorified through you. Let the light of the gospel shine the brightest when the world is at its darkest.

We all know the story of the Tree Little Pigs; a story that mirrors this final parable from Jesus. What is interesting is how each pig flees to the brick home where they are safe. We have such a haven in Christ. Let the world huff and puff, but we are hidden in the Rock of Ages, cleft for me.

As your State Minister, I, unashamedly, serve the Lord Jesus Christ through the organization of Capitol Commission. Capitol Commission brings gospel hope and spiritual strength to government leaders through prayer presence and proclamation in capitols across the USA and National Ministries Beyond America.