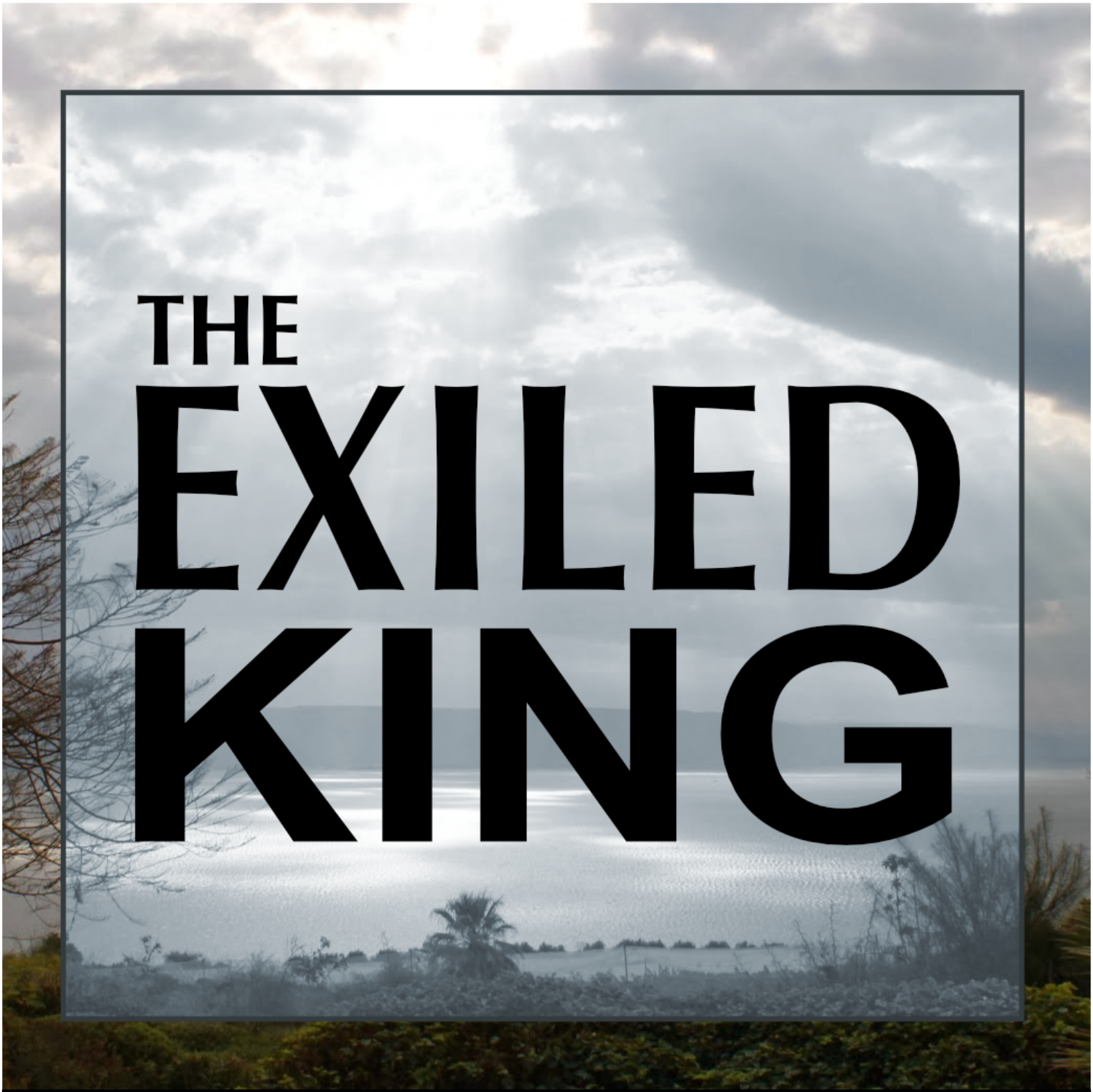

THE EXILED KING

A Guide for Engagement and Discussion

Bedford Road Baptist Church

Introduction

Over the next fourteen weeks, we will be journeying through what is usually called the "Sermon on the Mount." There are two versions of this in the Gospels. The first is found here in Matthew 5–7 and another, shorter version is found in Luke 6:17–49. Probably Jesus preached this sermon many times during his three years of ministry, so it is hardly surprising there are different versions presented.

Reading the Sermon as a Unit

On the surface, it seems the sermon is composed of little, self-contained sermonettes, and this is how most devotional works on the sermon treat it. This is not how it was written, however. Matthew carefully arranged the sermon so that it presents Jesus's teaching in a form known as a *chiasm*. This is named for the shape of the Greek letter *chi,* which looks like an X. This is because it uses arguments that meet at a central idea. In this structure, a teacher works toward a central idea, usually exploring teaching points that are familiar to their listeners. Once the teacher arrives at the central point, he will then work back outward. The teacher's main points reflect and contrast with the points presented at first. Here is a broad, and perhaps even oversimplified, model of the *chiastic* structure employed:

G1 ┌ 5:1–2, Narrative Frame: Setting
F1 ┌ 5:3–16, Discerning the Kingdom: The Beatitudes
E1 ┌ 5:17–20, Main Argument Introduction: Christ and the Law
D1 ┌ 5:21–48, Location of Faith: "You Have Heard It Said"
C1 ┌ 6:1–6, Visible Righteousness: Alms and Prayer
B1 ┌ 6:7–8, Prayer: Attitude
A – A – A – A – A – A ── 6:19–13, The Lord's Prayer
B2 └ 6:14–15, Prayer: Forgiveness
C2 └ 6:16–18, Visible Righteousness: Fasting
D2 └ 6:19–7:11, Location of Faith: "Treasures in Heaven"
E2 └ 7:12, Main Argument Conclusion: The Law Summarized
F2 └ 7:13–27, Discerning the Kingdom: False Teachers
G2 └ 7:28–8:1, Narrative Framework: Reaction

The purpose of this sketch of structure is to help us locate Jesus's individual statements within the broader context, because otherwise we could misinterpret them. The units of text are all part of a greater message, so we need to read them in that context. However, just how much of this framework was intentional and how of it was just a matter of Matthew reporting things as it occurred is impossible to know. Our structure helps us to visually approximate the connections of the argument. Not all of the sections are exactly the same size or utilize the most obvious of structural similarities.

There are, however, observable markers of the units. So, for example, the narrative frame sections marked here with *A's* (5:1–2 and 7:28–8:1) employ the imagery of the mountain and Jesus speaking. Jesus speaks about the Law and the Prophets in E1 and then briefly revisits the idea in E2, although E2 is significantly shorter than E1. Does Jesus abrogate the Law in his set of antitheses in D1? No, not at all. He had already made it clear that the Law is fulfilled in Him. Is he offering a moral code? He's not doing that either. He is rather *locating* our reliance upon the Law, moving it away from the temporal and the Pharisees' obsession with carefully parsing the Law to a faith in the heavenly Law, the "treasures in heaven" he talks about in D2. We do not need to be obsessed and anxious about "getting it completely right" because our own actions are not the merit we rely upon for our salvation.

Journeying Together Through This Guide

This book is a devotional guide, not a devotional. The distinction is important. You are not going to find a lot of pithy sayings that make you feel "ready to go" in the morning. So many devotional books are the equivalent of a spiritual granola bar—a little pick-me-up for the morning. This book is *not that*.

First, I want to encourage you to read the entire Sermon on the Mount in a single sitting every week. Preferably, you should do this out loud. The sermon was delivered out loud, and Matthew went through the work of translating it into Greek so it could be read aloud in worship. If you are reading it from an English translation like the King James Version or the English Standard Version, it was specifically translated into a style of English intended to be read aloud. So, sit down as a family or a couple or get together with some friends from church, or just find a place people won't look at you weirdly, and read it aloud. It will only take 15–20 minutes, and you will be amazed at how quickly you will become familiar with the words and nuances of the sermon.

Second, each week's guide is structured around responding to a passage we have explored the preceding Sunday worship gathering. Attempt to read the week's passage several times during that week. The guides do not follow a strict order, but rather explore different themes within that week's passage. For example, on Sunday, February 11, we will be looking at the Beatitudes (5:1–12). On Monday-Friday of that week, we will consider different aspects of that passage in more detail. The guides will point you to other Scriptures that might shed light upon the topics, but they will also prompt you to meditate upon things like practical applications or insights from the passage.

Third, as we journey together, don't only go forward. By this, I mean don't just fill out pages like this is a school workbook—checking off the to-do list so you can finish all the assignments. Jesus does not teach in a linear way, presenting propositions and proofs. He uses words to create images, parses ideas and then puts them back together, quotes common knowledge and turns it on its head. His style is interrelated. Take time to look back over previous sections. You may find your thinking evolves as you progress. You also should remember that the best interpreter of Scripture is Scriptures, so when you encounter something difficult, the key to understanding it might be in a previous section or it might be further along in the text.

A Note about Scripture and Languages

Generally, the quotations of Scripture here are from the English Standard Version (ESV). In quotes, I have replaced the common "the LORD" with YHWH to avoid confusion. YHWH is a proper name, and although we cannot be certain of the pronunciation (*Yahweh* is the best guess), there are millennia of practice behind rendering this as "Lord" (*'adonaî* in Hebrew, *kyrios* in Greek), I have elected to revert to the proper name. At times, I have provided an alternate English translation of some Scriptures. These are marked in this guide as (AT) and they are meant to supplement your reading of the text, not replace them.

I have tried not to use too much Hebrew and Greek, but it is unavoidable when discussing biblical texts. Transcriptions that appear here are meant to be read as normally as possible. The only major issues you might encounter are the Hebrew guttural letters *aleph* (transcribed as ʾ) and *ayin* (which appears as ʿ). Guttural sounds are difficult for people who do not speak the language, but you can safely *not* pronounce them without too much of an issue. You may also see vowels with an upward carat such as â, ê, î, etc. Biblical Hebrew was written in a consonantal text, without vowels. To clarify which word was being written, the consonants *yod* (י or *y*), *waw* (ו or w), and *het* (ה or *h*) were used to indicate vowels. For example, the word *bat* (daughter) and *bît* (house) would be indistinguishable without these added consonants. The vowels with the upward carats represent these vowels, which are *always* long. Finally, the symbol *š* indicates the *sh* sound as in *shell*.

It is necessary to make one more note about sources. At various times, I cite passages from the Talmud and other sources. The Talmud dates to a time *after* the composition of Matthew, but the teachings it quotes often reflect Jewish traditions that were contemporary with Jesus. They are therefore helpful in providing a possible context into which Jesus was speaking. I was hesitant to include such references, as they can be easily misunderstood; but in the end, I thought it was useful to include them. There is an excellent online repository at https://sefaria.org which you can use to look up the references if you would like. In addition, there are occasional references to non-canonical Second Temple Judaism (STJ) texts such as the Dead Sea Scrolls and pseudepigraphic Jewish works, and to a few historical sources. These citations appear in parenthetical citation, and they are abbreviated following the Society of Biblical Literature Style, 2nd ed. There is a table of the abbreviations on the next page if you want to consult it as you read.

Abbreviations

Significant Terms

AD	*Anno Domini* (Year of Our Lord, Common Era, CE)
Akk.	Akkadian language
ANE	Ancient Near East
Assyr.	Assyrian language
Bab.	Babylonian
BC	Before Christ (Before Common Era, BCE)
Gk.	Greek
HB	Hebrew Bible (Old Testament)
Heb.	Hebrew
LXX	Greek Septuagint
MH	Midrashic (Rabbinical) Hebrew
Mid.	Midrash
MT	Masoretic Text
NT	New Testament
SBH	Standard Biblical Hebrew (Classical Hebrew)
STJ	Second Temple Judaism
Ug.	Ugaritic language

Ancient Near East Texts

CAT	***Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts*** (also KTU), sigla for texts found at Ugarit

Greco-Roman Sources

Cod. Theo.	**The Theodosian Law Code:** a fourth century Roman legal code compiled by the emperors Theodosius II and Valentinian III.
Didache	**The Teaching of the Apostles:** an anonymous early Christian document that deals with matters of doctrine and practice
Jos. *Ant.*	***Antiquities of the Jews*:** one of two historical works written by Flavius Josephus in the last decades of the first century AD.
Jos. *Wars.*	***Wars of the Jews*:** one of two historical works written by Flavius Josephus in the last decades of the first century AD.
Pliny. *Nat. Hist.*	***Natural History:*** written by Pliny the Elder (23 BC–AD 55), the largest document from the Roman Empire to survive to modern times.

Dead Sea Scrolls/Qumran Texts

1QS	**Serek hayaḥad, "The Rule of the Community":** a manual for conduct of people from the Qumran sect **.**
4Q525	**"The Beatitudes Scroll":** a pre-Christian, possibly meant as a rewording of Proverbs 1–9.
4Q394	**"The Calendar":** a fragmentary pre-Christian calendar with small commentaries on it.

Talmud/Midrash

b. Bek.	**Bekhorot:** A section of the *Seder Kodashim* ("holy things" discussion firstborns and the consecration of animals.
b. Berakot.	**Berakot:** A section of the tractate Seder Zeraim of the Mishnah that deals with blessings.
b. Mak.	**Makkot:** A section of Nezikin dealing with court punishments.
b. Sanh.	**Babylonian Sanhedrin:** a longer version of the Sanhedrin tractate.
b. Šebu.	**Šebuʿot:** The sixth volume of Nezikin that deals with oaths under the ceremonial law.
b. Taʿan.	**Taʿanit:** A tractate of the Talmud devoted to the feast days. The **b.** designates the Babylonian Talmud.
b. Yebam.	**Yevamot:** a section of the Talmud dealing with levirate marriage and conversion.
b. Zebaḥ.	**Zebaḥim:** the first tractate of Seder Qodashim dealing with the sacrificial system.
D. Eretz Z.	**Dereḥ Eretz Zuta:** a book of ethics, one of the minor tractates of the Mishnah.
Gen. Rab.	**Genesis Rabbah:** A midrash on the Book of Genesis from sometime AD 300–500.
m. Nazir.	**Mishnah Nazir:** a tractate of Seder Nashim ("Order of Women," family law) dealing with Nazrizite vows.
m. Sanh.	**Mishnah Sanhedrin:** part of the Talmud division Nezikin, dealing with damages in legal proceedings.
m. Tem.	**Mishnah Temurah:** a tractate within *Seder Kodashim* ("holy things" dealing with sacrifices and what was acceptable and what had to be rejected.
m. ʾAbot.	**Mishnah ʾAbot:** a section of the Mishnah listing maxims and teachings of great rabbis.

Num. Rab.	**Numbers Rabbah:** A midrash on the Book of Numbers and the last to be added to the Midrash, probably in the eleventh century AD
Sif. Deut.	**Sifrei Devarim:** a legal midrash on Deuteronomy, with extensive narrative sections.
y. Bab. Qamma.	**Jerusalem Baba Qamma:** A section of the Jerusalem Talmud dealing with civil courts and damages.
y. Pe'ah	**Jerusalem Pe'ah:** Discussion of leaving gleanings for the poor (*pe'ah* means "corners").

Part 1

"Blessed"
Matthew 5:3–12

Monday, February 12

We often misunderstand the Beatitudes because the Greek word *makarios* is translated as "blessed" in our English Bibles. *Makarios* is likely a rendering of the Hebrew *ʾašreh*, which appears many times in the Psalms (Ps 1:1, 32:1, 40:4, 84:5), but rarely outside of it. There is a separate Hebrew word (*barak*) that means "blessing" or "blessed."

Matthew has an affinity for the Book of Isaiah, so we may look there to understand Jesus's use of the word. Consider how it is used in **Isaiah 30:18.**

> Therefore YHWH waits to be gracious to you,
> and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you.
> For YHWH is a just God;
> blessed [*ʾašreh*] are all those who are waiting for him. (AT)

The biblical scholar Jonathan Pennington has proposed that we should render *ʾašreh/makarios* as "flourishing" because it has an active sense while "blessed" has something of a passive feel. He says we should think of Jesus's commands to flourish (rather than blessed) as "a declared observation about a way of being in the world" (Pennington, 2017: 52–53). We are called to *thrive* in a world that may be opposed to our beliefs.

- How would rendering *makarios* as "flourishing" change your reading of the Beatitudes?

- What barriers exist in your life/thinking that restrict your ability to flourish in your Christian walk?

Tuesday, February 13

What does it mean to be "poor in spirit" (v 3)? Poverty always has a sense of emptiness but in the Hebrew Scriptures, it takes the meaning of being oppressed or marginalized (Isa 10:2, 61:1–2). While Jesus promises that the "poor in spirit" will be a part of the Kingdom of Heaven, it is hardly a novel idea.

At a point in which he had lost everything and things looked bleak for him, David wrote the following: "YHWH is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but YHWH delivers him out of them all" (Ps 34:18). It may be that Jesus was citing this reference. Shortly after David wrote this, Saul was killed in battle and David was proclaimed king. At the moment when he was giving the

Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was not much more than a Galilean teacher, but he would shortly be exalted as the Son of David and returning King.

It is a blessing to live in a society where we are not openly persecuted for our faith, but this is the exception in human history. As Jesus reminds his listeners, persecution is the default for those who stand with the word of God. We are not told to rejoice in persecution. That would be odd indeed. We are instead called to rejoice in our place in the Kingdom of Heaven, alongside the faithful (Heb 12:1–2).

For the early believers, who found themselves outside of both Jewish and Gentile worlds, this was a valuable reminder that our kingdom identity is not determined by our elevation or oppression in our present world. Jesus contrasts our *real* situation as part of his kingdom with our "real" situation that we perceive in our current world.

- In what ways are Christians marginalized in our present world? How do you feel about this situation?

- Have you ever felt "crushed in spirit"? What are two or three Scriptures you rely upon to be reminded that you are part of the Kingdom of Heaven?

Wednesday, February 14

Jesus placed a lot of emphasis on the future, offering hope to his listeners. When teaching is focused on a future state, it is called *eschatological*, meaning "looking to the end." At the same time, Jesus offered present promises mixed in with the future hope. As one commentator put it, "The early church found itself living in a tension between realization and expectation — between 'already' and 'not yet.' The age of fulfillment has come; the day of consummation stands yet in the future." (Ladd, 1993: 346)

It is in this tension that we are "poor in spirit" and "meek." It is in the present that we should "hunger and thirst after righteousness," but we will also be "persecuted for righteousness' sake." Often, we think of tension as a bad thing. We like the dissonance to resolve, and we want the tension to release; and yet the tension is where we grow and become *more*. Without the dissonance, we would stay the same and become complacent.

- Spend a little time talking with someone else about the tension you might be experiencing between the present and the 'not yet.' It does not need to be a spiritual situation. Maybe it is just an "everyday" situation or maybe it is something more.

- In what ways does an eschatological focus alter how we might see the present?

Thursday, February 15

The Beatitudes are presented in pairs, and the pairing with mercy is "pure in heart" (vv 7–8). Despite appearances, there is no reciprocity built into the Beatitudes. If we show mercy solely so we will receive mercy, then ultimately it is not mercy (vv. 7–8). Think about it. Mercy has to be given to someone else. Done only so we can receive mercy, it is nothing more than selfishness disguised as altruism. Being pure of heart (*bar-lavav* in Hebrew) does not mean we lack defect. It is a heart awareness of our own sinfulness, a willingness to be honest about our realities. It is likely that Jesus alludes here to Psalm 24:3–4: "And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart [*bar-lavav*]." It is not hard to see how Jesus's statement flows out of the principles in this text, but there may also be parallels to the prophecies of Joel.

> "Yet even now," YHWH declares, "return to me with all your heart,
> with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning,
> and rend your hearts and not your garments.
> "Return to YHWH your God, for he is gracious and merciful,
> slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love [*ḥesed*];
> and he does not want to destroy you." (AT)

This call to repentance is a call to place ourselves within the mercy of God. If mercy flows from a pure heart, it is only when our hearts are placed in the hands of the merciful God of *ḥesed* that they are purified. The call to "rend your hearts and not your garments" is a call to introspection and honesty about our own inner walk, not so we can receive something from God but so we can be honest with the God who is able to give to us as he pleases.

The cause of the blessing is not *our behavior*. In a sort of paradox, we act worthy of what God is doing in us only after he has already begun doing it through Jesus. Mercy and purity of heart are both the results of God's work on us *and* ideals for us to live up to, simultaneously. We are honest with ourselves and God at the heart level, and he is working in us. The 'already' and the 'not yet' cannot be separated in the life of the believer. There is a synergy of the present and the future, as well as our actions in our free will and God's actions as sovereign king.

- Do you catch yourself doing something "good" in the hope of getting something in return? What do you usually do if you find yourself thinking that way?

- How does your thinking about the disciplines of Christian life change if you focus on a synergy with God's work in you rather than trying to obtain something by ethical actions?

Friday, February 16

In verse 12, Jesus defines *makarios* by placing it in parallel with "rejoice and be glad." Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, there is a sense of happiness in proper relationship with God. To be righteous is not just to be compliant with the tenets of the Law. We live out the Law as peacemakers, as mourners, and those who endure

persecution. Righteousness is not defined by our behavior in the comfortable moments, but in those of adversity.

Jesus viewed persecution as unavoidable if one wishes to stand with God's righteousness. Again, we find a superimposition of a mysterious Kingdom with our present circumstances in such a way that they are both contradictory and inseparable. Jesus uses righteousness (*dikaiosynē*) to refer to the "rightness" of justice and God's will, not personal righteousness. It is the higher good of God, and not just observance of the Law. Doubtless, Matthew wants us to see true righteousness in people like Joseph who, as a righteous man, sought not only to observe the Law, but also to care for Mary and her unborn child by not shaming her (1:19). This righteousness *exceeded* that of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20).

- In what ways is Jesus is working toward a "greater law," a different and much simpler view of righteousness, as he develops his sermon, expressing it in Matthew 7:12? How is his understanding different from other religious ethics?

- Many people have attempted to embrace a "biblical ethics" based on defining the Beatitudes as behaviors. How is this different from seeing it as a reflection of the righteousness of God?

"Salt & Light"
Matthew 5:13–16

Monday, February 19

For the Greeks and Romans, salt was one of the pillars of human civilization (Carusi, 2018: 482). "Nothing is more useful than salt and sunshine" (Pliny *Natural History*, 31.102). Good salt is fairly difficult to obtain, because it either has to be mined or extracted from salt water. Cheap salt, usually obtained from bogs and salty soils, was full of impurities. Only wealthy people used salt as a condiment for food. It was primarily used as a preservative, chiefly for fish.

There is another aspect of salt that is rarely mentioned in relation to this statement. Salt was so valuable that it was used to seal covenants between God and Israel. This probably predated the Israelite religion, as sharing something of such value (usually during a meal) would show the commitment to the covenant.

> "You shall salt all your grain offerings with salt.
> You shall not let the salt of the covenant with your God be missing from your grain offerings.
> With all your grain offerings you shall offer salt." (Lev 2:13; cf. Num 18:19; 2 Chr 13:15)

Everyone understood what it meant for salt to become useless, but Jesus's statement would have resonated particularly with his Galilean audience, who were dependent upon salt for the fish trade. Cheap salt could easily lose its saltiness, leaving behind only the useless and impure pollutants. If your salt lost its saltiness (which meant the actual salt was washed away), your catch would be wasted and your livelihood was lost.

The presence of believers is *necessary* for the life of the world. Despite the way the world feels about us, we are God's preservatives, his valuable offering to the world that he has not given up and he still desires a covenant with each and every one of them. But salt must be active in order to accomplish anything.

- Do you feel you are an active "seasoning" presence in your immediate context? What about your church community in the community?

- How can we become more active in our influence on the world without becoming confrontational or political? Is there even a way?

Tuesday, February 20

When Jesus talked about a city on a hill, he was probably referring to the way that Jerusalem was visible to those on pilgrimage. The temple was covered in white limestone and crowned with gold, so it reflected the sun and during the day, it could be visible for miles. Because the terrain to the east of Judea is below sea level, the sun would seem to set much earlier than it really did. The light reflected off Jerusalem would still illuminate the mountainous horizon, not unlike the way cities create ambient light in the sky today. Miles away, you still knew where Jerusalem was because it was the only bright thing in the midst of emptiness.

Four times in Isaiah, Israel is called a light to the nations (Isa 42:6, 49:6, 51:4, 60:3). In particular, the account of the magi following the light of the star may be a fulfillment of Isaiah 60:3. The purpose of a light is not to illuminate itself, but rather to light up its surroundings. Hiding it would be denying the light its very essence of existence. Salt is meant to be, well, *salty*. Light is meant to shine. Those are the natural, most obvious things for them to do. Salt that isn't salty isn't salt. Light that doesn't illuminate isn't light. The actions are reflective of the very essence of both. It is supposed to be in the believer's nature to be a present influence on the world.

- Light is usually taken for granted until it is absent. Have you ever had an experience where your absence was noticed by someone and they spoke to you about how much they missed you?

- Does being light mean we must always be positive or smiley? How do we "illuminate" things in the world?

Wednesday, February 21

The words "earth" and "world" are parallels in many ways, but they are different words in Greek (*gē* and *kosmos*) just as they are in Hebrew (*'eretz* and *tebel*). In both language, there is a blurry but present distinction between the place inhabited ("earth") and the activity of those inhabiting the place ("world"). The "earth" simply is, but the "world" can be controlled by powers in conflict with God (Luke 16:8; John 12:31; 2 Cor 4:4). Both are closely moored to this existence, a reminder that what the Kingdom of Heaven is *includes* a presence in this present world. So often we think of spiritual things as "other," as separate from our current existence.

We are part of this world and yet different from it. As Christians, we are commanded to hold at bay the powers of the world (Eph 6:12). The world is not our prison until we ascend to a higher plane. It is our field in which we work as laborers and stewards (John 4:33–38). We cannot be salt if we do not season. We cannot be light if we do not illuminate.

- What is one aspect of your daily world that needs a little salt? A little light? A little bit of your active faith as your minister to others?

- How often do you pray for the world around you? Is it more or less often than you complain about it? Consider this challenge. For one day, every time you are tempted to complain about something in the world, pray for it instead.

Thursday, February 22

"Good works" get a bad rap in modern Christianity. It is true that our works cannot save us (Eph 2:9). Let's make that clear right up front. As James points out, however, we cannot say we have faith if it is not lived out in our actions (James 2:14–26). The issue is translating the Greek word *ergon* as "works." It is more accurate to render it as "activity" or "actions." Our actions in this world represent God to this world. The heavenly Father is glorified in us when we bring the values and truths of heaven into this world system, when we speak "salty" truth into the false perceptions and bring light upon the things done in the dark (Matt 10:27; Luke 12:3).

Words have no substance. They are just vibrations in the air or ink scratched on a page. While Christians hold to the truth of Scripture, there is something tangible to action. When we act as the Kingdom in the world, we participate in the revelation of God to the world.

- If we read the text carefully, we see that our role as "salt" and "light" is paralleled with "the prophets who were before you" (v 12). How can "good works" serve the same purpose of prophets?

- What kind of activities will draw the focus of those around us to God? To glorify Him? Name one concrete activity that is *not* one of the big three (go to church, share the gospel, read your Bible).

Friday, February 23

"Our Father who is in heaven" (v 16, cf. 6:9, 14) is a formulation unique to Matthew's gospel, and although it is present in some rabbinical literature, it is used very differently here. The Talmud records a tradition concerning the definition of a stranger or foreigner. In this tradition, the stranger is still part of the Father's domain, but is rejected for their behavior.

> "What is the meaning when the verse [Ezek 44:7] states: "Stranger"? [*nekar*] It is referring to one whose actions are considered *estranged from his Father in heaven,* i.e., an apostate, who sins regularly." (*b. Zebaḥ* 22b.5)

In Matthew, Jesus radically alters *how* we think of God (Carson, 1984: 106). Jesus ushers in the idea of a brotherhood in Christ, with the faithful viewing God as Father (Rom 8:29; Heb 2:10–17). He interprets the idea of a stranger not as one who is estranged, but following Isaiah again, Jesus sees the stranger [*nekar*] as being invited into fellowship with God.

> Let not the foreigner [*nekar*] who has joined himself to YHWH say,
> "YHWH will surely keep me separate from his people."
> Let not the eunuch say,
> "Behold, I am a dry tree."
> For this is what YHWH says:
> "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
> who choose the things that please me
> and hold fast my covenant,
> "I will give in my house and within my walls
> a monument and a name
> better than sons and daughters;
> "I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off." (Isa 56:3–5, AT)

Jesus's view of the outsider or stranger could not be more different than the rabbis' view. The foreigner becomes a part of the family, "better than sons and daughters" when he joins himself to God. Thus, "our heavenly father" is not just the Father in heaven, but also the Father of the heavens which span all the earth, under which all of humanity lives.

- Matthew is often called a "Jewish gospel" because of the perception that it was written primarily to Jews. How does unpacking some of these implicit promises to include the Gentiles affect how you read the gospel?

- What estranges a person from God? How does someone who is a "stranger" find a way to "join himself" to God?

"The Law and the Prophets"
Matthew 5:17–20

Monday, February 26

The foundation of Israel's identity was the Law (*tôrah*) and Prophets (*nevi'îm*), the bulk of what we call the Old Testaments. Jesus makes it clear that his purpose is not to wipe this identity out, but to fulfill or complete it. Matthew even phrases the Greek in such a way that it answers objections before they are raised. In essence, Jesus says something like: don't misunderstand what I am saying here.

There is a double meaning to "fulfill" in this context. Jesus both fulfills all the requirements of the Law and the Prophets *and* he provides the proper interpretation of them, in his person and acts. Many of the NT writers relied on the latter for their interpretation of things like sacrifices and the priesthood. Jesus both filled the role of these things, making it no longer necessary for the roles to be fulfilled in the temple, but he also provided the interpretation of these things as symbols of something greater (Heb 10:1–3).

This section is an *inclusio,* meaning it introduces a section of the text. This section will run to the closing *inclusio* in 7:12 when Jesus again references the Law and the Prophets. There, Jesus will explain what the true fulfillment of the Law and Prophets is for the believer, but *that* fulfillment is dependent upon Jesus's much greater fulfillment.

- How do you read the Old Testament, in relation to your own spiritual life?

- What tools would be useful for you in understanding the complex relationship between the Old and New Testaments?

Tuesday, February 27

Jesus believed the Scriptures were meant to outlast all of the ideas and institutions of this world (Ps 119:89). His assertion was fundamental to being a part of the conversation in Judaism, and yet he will demonstrate that when it comes to the text, he did not agree with the Pharisees on their interpretations. The Pharisees had an additional, oral Torah, which was codified as the teachings of important rabbis but claimed to represent traditions going back to Moses. What Jesus meant was something very different from what they believed.

Not all affirmations of the Scriptures are the same. We need to be willing to ask what people mean when they use terms like "biblical." Something that is truly biblical will be in conformity with it. Often people use "biblical"

to mean that they found a verse that supports a position, even if that position conflicts with reality (both Scriptural and empirical). This kind of interpretation by isolation is dangerous.

- How do you evaluate resources (books, music, etc.) for biblical content? Do you have criteria you use?

- What role does the Church have in guiding our evaluation of things "biblical"? How would you assess the work of the Church (at large, not just Bedford Road) in their capacity here? How could they do better?

Wednesday, February 28

What are an *iota* and a *dot?* The *yod* (*jot* in the KJV or *iota* in Greek) is the smallest Hebrew consonant (י), which is made with a single stroke of the pen. The *dot* (*tittle* in KJV, *tilde* in German, and *kepaia* in Greek) is the ending ornament of a horizontal stroke that distinguishes similar looking letters in Hebrew (for example, between כ, the *k* sound, and ב, the *b* sound). These might seem insignificant, but they alter meaning entirely. Jesus's point is that the Law hangs together perfectly, and altering it or omitting part of it would make it *less than* the word of God. He will later make the same statement about his own words (24:35), as a testimony to his fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Jesus makes the point that we cannot relax the Law. We cannot dismiss any of the commandments and say they don't not matter, because they do—even the weird ones. We do not have the authority to loosen the Law up and find some wiggle room for ourselves. As Paul points out, the Law teaches us righteousness, if only by our inability to obey it perfectly (Gal 3:23–29). Jesus's arrival does not loosen it. If anything, his presence reinforces the Law's truth. In Christ, we are no longer obligated to the Law, but it nonetheless deserves our respect as the Word of God.

- Why do you think we tend to classify sin by categories, ranking some as "worse" than others?

- How would you explain the Old Testament Law to someone who asked you why you do not follow it?

Thursday, February 29

The inversion of the greatest and the least is a theme throughout Jesus's ministry. It is often called "the Great Reversal," and you can really see it at work in Luke's gospel where almost everyone who is in a position to hear Jesus (priests, teachers, men) fail to heed him while those who, by all accounts, should not (women, lepers, demoniacs) do hear him and obey. This draws attention to the reality that present circumstances do not dictate our place in the Kingdom of Heaven.

If you read Jesus's statement about the Law in verse 19, he emphasizes that it is not just loosening the commandments. It is about *teaching* that even the smallest commandment can be broken, that it is not important. Teaching that to the least in the kingdom is tantamount to calling into question the testimony of God, and as God is one of the primary witnesses of Jesus's authority and God is always consistent, this calls into question Jesus himself. To demean the Law is to demean grace.

Jesus may also be addressing the tendency of rabbis to use hyperbole to make a point. For example, in a commentary on Deuteronomy 24:16 and 2 Samuel 21:1–6, Yoḥanan ben Zakai, perhaps the greatest of the first century rabbis, argued, "it is better that one letter and one commandment be uprooted from the Torah in this manner and thereby the name of Heaven not be desecrated in public" (*b. Yebam.* 79). In his thinking, one could violate Torah if it meant that God was not shamed before the Gentiles. It is not hard to see the danger that lurks in this justification. Jesus takes the hyperbole to its extreme, focusing not on letters or commandments but the ends of strokes used to make letters.

- If you have dealt with someone questioning the authority of Scripture, how did you respond? Was it an effective response?

- What significance do you place on the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly the Law, in your own study of Scripture?

Friday, March 1

Righteousness was a hot topic in Jesus's day. The Pharisees in particular were obsessed with coming up with the right formula for righteousness before the Law. What is more, righteousness was something that had to be visible for *their* evaluation. Jesus dealt specifically with their public acts of righteousness later in the sermon.

Jesus turns the table on the Pharisees by arguing that their efforts to make a Torah-observant society would "domesticate the Law" rather than promote absolute holiness. He hints that they *know* such holiness is impossible and so have created achievable holiness through their codes and oral law (Carson, 1984: 146).

Paul later took this idea further, seeing the Law as "the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone." It was glorious, but it cannot be truly glorious without the Spirit of God.

> Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone,
> came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face
> because of its glory,
> which was being brought to an end,
> will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory?
> For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation,
> the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory.

Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all,
because of the glory that surpasses it.
For if what was being brought to an end came with glory,
much more will what is permanent have glory. (2 Cor 3:7–11)

- What are your thoughts on the relationship of the Law and Jesus's work? This is a complex issue so, there is room for discussion.

- Why do people like to "domesticate" the Law? Make God's righteousness manageable on a human level?

"Anger"
Matthew 5:21–26

Monday, March 4

Jesus's use of the phrase "you have heard it said" throughout this section (5:21–48, known as "the antitheses") probably indicates that most Jews of the period did not read the Scriptures for themselves (Quarles, 2017: 55). It was not that they were illiterate, but that Torah scrolls were expensive and so not available to everyone. People were dependent upon their rabbis for the synagogue reading and interpretation, probably in a similar way that Jesus is depicted teaching in Luke 4:16–30. When a rabbi interpreted or extended the text in a practical way, it was referred to as "making a fence around the Torah" (*m. ʾAvot.* 1.1; Basser, 2008: 111–113).

At every point, Jesus offers both a Scriptural citation and the interpretation that appears to have accompanied it. These interpretations extend the text, sometimes making them more abstract and sometimes more specific. This is typical of *midrash* or interpretive teaching. Jesus takes every interpretation to its logical extreme to demonstrate that the interpretation itself is faulty. When citing Scripture, Jesus does not say "you have heard it said" but rather "it is written," emphasizing the primary of the written text over the oral tradition (11:10, 21:13, 26:31).

- Interpretation is important when we consider Scripture. What was faulty in the interpretations that Jesus rejected?

- Why do you think it is important that God's revelation is a written record rather than some other medium? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this?

Tuesday, March 5

Three times, Jesus discusses the idea of being "liable" (21, 22). The Greek word is *enoḥos,* and it conveys a sense of guilt and just desserts. In considering the idea of murder, Jesus asks whether lesser sins such as anger or insults are not also sins which should be judged. He asks this because it was common for rabbis to argue that the only sins you could be judged for were those explicitly stated in Torah. Since murder was clearly stated, you could be punished; but insult or even anger were not mentioned as sins and so were not "technically" sins that you could be punished for (Basser, 2015: 139–40). On top of this, one was only punished if there were witnesses, so you could violate Torah but without ample legal evidence, the accusations could be treated as nothing more than rumor, and there would be no punishment (*b. Mak.* 6a; *b. Sanh.* 8b).

Jesus emphasizes the *spirit of the Torah* beyond the letter. The same emotions underly murder, insult, and other expressions of anger. They should all therefore be subject to judgment. This is part of Jesus's fundamental argument. Either *all* of the Law applied to *all levels* of life, or none of the Law applies to any of our lives; and because it is God's Law, the Law should apply whether we can properly try the sin or not.

- Seeing all the hoops the Pharisees jumped through to decide what was "liable to judgment" and what wasn't, what are your thoughts on this kind of thing? How do we balance our evaluations of people's behavior between fairness and legalism? Is there even a way to do so?

- Jesus seems to always push beyond observable righteousness. Do you think he dismisses the idea of appearances altogether? Or is there still a place for evaluating appearances and visible behavior? How does that fit with grace?

Wednesday, March 6

Do you notice that Jesus switched focus all of the sudden? He is talking about judgment on those who do things against their brothers, but then he talks about your brother having something against you (vv 23–24). It is not our actions that we need to deal with at the altar, but with others' attitude. While the Pharisees were obsessed with what could be judged to be a sin, Jesus deals with the reality of sin. If you did something against someone else, it is sin whether "the council" thinks it is or not. The early church saw this as an extension of Malachi 1:14, and in the *Didache* (an early handbook for churches written after the time of the apostles), they wrote this:

> And on the Lord's own day gather yourselves together and break bread and give thanks, first confessing your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure. And let no man, having his dispute with his fellow, join your assembly until they have been reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be defiled; for this sacrifice it is that was spoken of by the Lord, "in every place and at every time offer Me a pure sacrifice; for I am a great king, saith the Lord, and My name is wonderful among the nations." (*Didache*, 14:1–3)

In other words, sin—even sin that can't be "proven" to a judging council—corrupts the relationships of the faithful. It taints our worship, and so while it might not be "a big deal" to you, as a believer you are not in isolation. You are part of a community and that community is affected.

- Why do you think Jesus elevates the right relationship above the "right" outward signs?

- Do you find yourself thinking only about the personal implications of sin rather than the relational aspect? What have you done in your life to retain your awareness of relational righteousness?

Thursday, March 7

In verse 22, the ESV text says "whoever insults his brother," but the underlying Greek text has a very specific insult transcribed from Aramaic. A literal translation is, "Whoever says *râqa'* to his brother." This was a remark that was often used in the household, particularly to younger siblings and servants. It was generally not considered a particularly harsh insult, more of a casual statement on par with "what were you thinking?" or "come on, man!" The word translated as "you fool" is the Greek *mōros* (the root of our word "moron") and while commentaries try to find an Aramaic equivalent, it is likely that Jesus is supplying a parallel for his bilingual audience. He makes *râqa'* and *mōros* equivalent, appealing to both the Hebrew/Aramaic and Greek speakers.

The Talmud includes a later story of Rabbi Elazar b. Shimon (2nd century AD) insulting a man. Deep in thought as he rode along the river, Elazar was greeted by a man. When Elazar looked at him, he was taken aback by how ugly he was, and Elazar exclaimed, "*Râqa'!* How ugly is this man! Are all the men of your city as ugly as you are?" The man then responded, "You should go and say to the 'Craftsman Who Made Me', *how ugly is the vessel you made.*" (*b. Ta'an.* 20b) It is possible that this story reflects Jesus's teachings in a Jewish setting, but it is also possible that it represents a traditional fable reset in Elazar's context. The insult is not an attack on the person, but on the person's Maker. In other words, it questions God's sovereignty.

This idea that attacking the creation is attacking the Creator is hardly new. It was fundamental to Hebrew law (Gen 9:6). By using such a casual, *flippant* insult as *râqa'*, Jesus is not trying to argue that we never say anything like this, but that we cannot categorize sin into boxes of "bad enough to be judged" and "it was just for fun" or "it isn't that big of a deal."

- Does this discussion make you think about how we might dishonor God in the ways we talk or think about one another?

- What other Scriptures might speak to this issue of treating others? Can you see Jesus's teaching here as possibly the foundation for the apostles' opposition to showing favoritism in the church (for example, James 2:1–13)?

Friday, March 8

Jesus's last statement in the section seems a bit out of place. Why does he emphasize that his hearers could be kept in prison "until you have paid the last penny" (v 26)? The Greek word translated as "penny" is the Greek version of the Latin *quadrans,* which meant "one fourth" because it was roughly the pay for one-quarter of an hour's work in the Greco-Roman world. We can again see how Matthew's gospel bridges Jewish and Greek worlds, with an illustration that would have been familiar only to those who used Greco-Roman currency, and it may also hint at Jesus's familiarity with the Greco-Roman pay scales if he worked as an artisan alongside Joseph, who would have been employed on many projects for their Gentile masters.

This was a very small amount of money, which could easily be considered a "margin of error" so Jesus uses it to illustrate that *all sin* must be fully accounted for. Many read this as a primarily ethical teaching, but undergirding the ethics is a theology of full recompense for sin, something which must be satisfied. Surely, if man can be imprisoned for an offense against another, man should be punished for offenses against God.

At every point in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is driving at this point to show that we can never satisfy every requirement of the Law, so it is hardly surprising that the to "forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors" sits so prominently in the central prayer (6:11). Our relationship to others is a reflection of our relationship with God, because man is created in the image of God. The subtle bigotry and condescension of the Pharisees and Sadducees was not righteousness. It was in conflict with God's intention for relationships.

- This week, you may have noticed a strong emphasis on relationships. This is because believers do not live in isolation. Our relationships matter. What is one relationship you can identify as "needing work" this coming week?

- What concrete steps will you take to work on that relationship? (Hint: your first step should be to *immediately* tell the person you have to work on the relationship and restore health.)

"Immoral"
Matthew 5:27–32

Monday, March 11

Most modern readers do not understand that in the Greco-Roman world adultery (*moiḥeyō*) was only a sin for married man if he slept with a married woman. To have relations with *any man* beside her husband was a sin for a woman (hence the reason the scribes and Pharisees only brought a woman to Jesus in John 8:1–12). Fundamentally, it treated a woman's sexual identity as exclusively her husband's property but as the "owner," a

man was not so restricted. Although never explicitly stated, the Jewish leaders seem to have accommodated this arrangement; and they certainly seemed to have allowed for a man to have sexual relations with non-Israelite women, since the prohibition only protected the rights of Jewish men.

Jesus's statement that a man could sin in lusting after a woman broke considerably with the thinking of the day. As an extension of his view of human relationships, Jesus took the marriage relationship to be a reflection of God's nature and violating it, even in theory or fantasy, was a mark of man's unrighteousness. Jesus adopts an authoritative posture by leading off with "I say to you," putting his own interpretation on par with (and ultimately exceeding) the interpretation of the rabbis.

- How would it change your behavior if you viewed every relationship and interaction with others as a reflection of God's nature and relationships?

- Sexual sin gets a lot of coverage in churches today, often being the most prominent issue discussed (especially when it comes to LGBTQIA+ discussions). Do you think this focus is warranted? How do you think the church (not Bedford Road specifically, but the church in general) is doing handling this issue, in comparison to how Jesus discusses these issues?

Tuesday, March 12

In his discussion of anger, Jesus addressed one of the ten commandments (Exod 20:13). Now he is addressing another (Exod 20:14). He is not systematically addressing the ten commandments, but these ten statements were foundational to the Jewish thinking about God and the Law. They are mentioned as "the ten words" (*ʿśeret had-barîm*) within the Torah (Exod 34:28; Deut 4:13; 10:4), and they serve as the root of the legal codes that follow them (Exod 21:1–23:19). They are mentioned repeatedly as being stored in the Ark of the Covenant (Deut 10:2; 1 Kgs 8:9; 2 Chr 5:10). That Jesus highlights only a few here does not indicate he did not address all of them in his teaching, but he does single a handful out for consideration.

In other gospels, Jesus extended the prohibition on adultery to include the casual divorces of his day (Mark 10:12; Luke 16:18). Just as the prohibition on murder elevates human life, the prohibition on adultery elevates human marriage. It is given a sacred status in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the apostle Paul elevates it almost to the divine (Eph 5:22–33).

- Jesus uses the ten commandments as a launching pad for fairly elaborate discussions. He applies them both in disproving other views and arguing for his own. How can we be sure we are not exceeding the mandate of the Scriptures when we apply them?

Wednesday, March 13

When discussing the lust of the eyes, Jesus is dealing with our imaginations. For the Jews, the imagination began with what one could see, but it is rooted in the heart. In Jewish thought, true adultery occurs in the heart, and that is the root of the Hebrew word *zīmah*, which literally means "hidden intent" or "something done in the dark" (see Prov 21:27). As one midrash on Numbers puts it, "It is called 'adultery' [*zīmah*] because both of them deny [their actions] and say, 'We did not commit a sin'" (*Num. Rab.* 9:1).

While it is not incorrect to read this passage as a warning about lust, Jesus seems to be getting at the point that adultery is a "hidden" thing that people try to get away with by saying they're *not* doing it. In other words, Jesus is speaking to the sin of denial as much as to the sin of adultery. He is perhaps drawing on the Proverbs, which is also cited in the Midrash (*Num. Rab.* 9:11–12) but here is provided without that commentary.

> There are six things that the Lord hates,
> seven that are an abomination to him:
> haughty eyes, a lying tongue,
> and hands that shed innocent blood,
> **a heart that devises wicked plans,** feet that make haste to run to evil,
> a false witness who breathes out lies,
> and one who sows discord among brothers. (Proverbs 6:16–18)

This passage is a series of triplets with a kicker at the end. In fact, you can see a parallel to Jesus's words on anger in the "haughty eyes…" triplet, and adultery in the "heart that devises…" section. There is a *procession from* perception to action to "cover up" and all result in discord and disunity among brothers.

- If sin indeed begins in the heart/eyes, what safeguards can we put in place to help us?

- These are sins which affect relationships. How can we employ relationships to safeguard against them?

Thursday, March 14

Often when discussing interpretation of Scripture, people will argue for a "literal reading" of the text. Usually "literal" means to interpret the Scriptures flatly, accept whatever is said as concrete. When Jesus talks about plucking out eyes and cutting off hands (vv. 29–30), he is using hyperbole to make a point. This is a good example of a situation where the most literal reading is not the most concrete. The most literal reading of this is *not* to advocate for self-mutilation, but rather to read these statements as figurative language. Jesus is exaggerating to make his point, and the meaning is encoded into the text, rather than being explicit (Llewelyn and Robinson, 2021: 430–33).

This is a fairly simple example of encoded meaning, but there is a great deal of it in Jesus's teachings. For example, when he says "take up my cross" (10:38, 16:24), he does not mean all believers will be crucified and the

apostles understood this (Gal 5:24, 6:14; Phil 3:10). When he calls us to "eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood" (John 6:53), he is not calling us to literal cannibalism. Both are idiomatic ways of describing our commitment to Christ as being complete. Encoded speech requires intelligent engagement, and this means that God has placed a certain amount of trust in you, as a believer, to interpret the Scriptures using your mind—guided by the Holy Spirit to be sure—but still fully engaged (2 Tim 2:15).

- Share a time when you or someone you were speaking with missed an encoded meaning in the Bible. How did you correct the mistake and encourage healthy reading and interpretation habits?

- Can you identify a Christian group (and this can be taken very loosely) who bases a particular belief on a misinterpretation of the text? What do you think we should do to ensure we are not adversely influenced by such things, which can often be subtle?

Friday, March 15

Divorce is such a significant part of our society that it is difficult to realize just how rare it was in the ancient world. Although there are some vague criteria provided in the Torah (Deut 24:1–4), very little was written about it, and there are no accounts of its implementation in the Hebrew Scriptures. The rabbinical views of divorce seem to have evolved under Greco-Roman hegemony, and by the time of the Mishnah (late 2nd century AD), interpretation was so influenced by Roman jurisprudence that it is difficult to reconstruct how divorce was handled during Jesus's time (Lapin, 2012: 134–35). We can say with certainty that the rabbis held that marriage among Jews was categorically different from Gentile marriage (*Gen. Rab.* 18.24). The blurring of the distinction had a lot to do with Jews losing their privileged status in the Roman Empire after the Bar Kôkba' Revolt (AD 132–36).

Jesus's position on divorce ignores the expansion of divorce in Judaism, and he returns to the idea that only sexual immorality (*porneia*; translating the Hebrew *'ervah*) was acceptable grounds for divorce. From Jesus's perspective, seeking justification for convenient divorce would be no different than committing adultery. It provides a veneer of righteousness on top of an unrighteous act. This is why he says it forces the woman to commit adultery. She has done nothing to disqualify herself from the marriage, and therefore there should be no divorce.

- When societal norms are at odds with biblical truth, how do you respond? What steps can you take to maintain righteousness for yourself and those with whom you are connected?

- Casual divorce is one example of a societal norm sometimes self-justified by Scripture. What other examples might exist in our present context?

"To Swear"
Matthew 5:33–37

Monday, March 18

Jesus introduces the discussion of oaths with the word "again" (*palin*), which indicates that this discussion is connected to the previous section on marriage and divorce. Just as marriage is a covenant, every commitment is a covenant and God takes covenants seriously. Here, Jesus appears to be discussing legal testimony and not just regular promises or truthfulness. In this respect, he is also drawing on circumstances similar to the idea of being "subject to the council" and required witnesses (vv 23–24). Just as divine justice and righteousness are not dictated by the legal decisions of a council, so truthfulness and commitments are not dictated by the oaths we take. The oath does not keep a man right; and a right man does not need an oath.

The underlying issue of the human condition that Jesus is addressing is our sinfulness. We *require* things like oaths and covenants because without them, we are tempted to violate what we promise to preserve. Human beings are inclined to do whatever is to their advantage. On the other hand, a covenant or a promise is about the other person, sacrificing your own convenience to provide something for them.

- Do you find that the more you honor your word, the easier it is to do so? Can trustworthiness become a habit?

- If you have dealt with someone who has broken a trust or a promise, how hard is it to develop trust with them again? Why is that?

Tuesday, March 19

We owe each other nothing more than truth. In a world obsessed with not hurting each other's feelings and making sure you toe the line of appropriateness, we are reminded that Jesus said we should be so truthful that it would be meaningless for us to swear we will do something. These oaths he is describing were contracts, agreements to pay something or do a job for someone.

As Jesus points out that such an oath has no power because you cannot actually back it up in any tangible way. Jesus cites Leviticus 19:12, which states that any oath must be an oath to YHWH. For his audience, such an oath was inviolate, but an oath taken to something on earth could be backed out of without being dishonest. Jesus argues that since God is over all things, swearing to anything was swearing to him.

According to the historian Josephus, this view was also held by the sect of the Essenes, and as a result, they were considered to be excellent adjudicators because they would speak only the truth (Jos. *Wars* 2.135). In their thinking, if you could not be trusted without an oath, then any oath you took was inherently unreliable. Oaths therefore were a sign of unreliability, not reliability.

- Is there a difference between being *truthful* and being *trustworthy?* If so, what is it?

- With the proliferation of digital media, it is easy to see the world as full of false perceptions and the line between the truth and fiction is sometimes blurry. How can you ensure you are relying on trustworthy sources?

Wednesday, March 20

Swearing by your head (v 36) was a way of circumventing the restrictions and legality of an oath. It was basically equivalent to saying, "I'm good for it" (*M. Sanh.* 3:2). You avoided taking an oath to God, and instead stood in your own witness. It was usually accompanied by a clever lie or careful language that would negate the promise if things didn't work out. In other words, it was how you created an "escape clause" for yourself.

Jesus's quote of Leviticus 19:12 may indicate that he is talking about the practice of making oaths you do not intend to keep and not swearing oaths in general. Creating loopholes was a common practice, and the Jewish rabbis eventually created a rule similar to Jesus's statement here, namely that all oaths were to God (*b. Šebu.* 35a–b). It seems Jesus was a bit ahead of his time.

- We all create loopholes for ourselves from time to time. We hope we don't need them, but we also don't quite trust situations at times. "Don't put all your eggs in one basket," as the proverb goes. Do you think this kind of thinking has been detrimental to institutions like marriage or church? What can be done?

- On the other hand, why do we safeguard against institutions and ideas like we do? Where does the distrust come from? Is there a way to overcome the untrustworthy nature of many institutions?

Thursday, March 21

In verse 37, the text really reads, "Let your words be 'yes, yes' [*nai nai*], 'no, no' [*ou, ou*]." This is a specific formulation that was a response to a request for an oath (*D. Eretz Z.* 5:1) Rabbi Elazar was credited with this teaching: "Saying 'no' can be an oath, and saying 'yes' can be an oath" (*b. Šebu.* 36a). Put another way, when asked for an oath, just responding yes or no should be sufficient. If your repetition is not good enough for people to trust you, you have failed to honor God in a way that others can see. Your character is your testimony.

There is a popular proverb credited to at least half a dozen people, and probably predates all of them. "Character is who you are when no one is looking." We might revise that to say that character is who you *decide to be* when no one is looking. All of us struggle to have our yes be yes and our no be no.

- Would you say you have a consistent, reliable character? If so, how do you maintain it? If not, what steps can you take to build disciplines and consistency into your character?

- Relate the narrative of any individual from the Bible who represents consistent trustworthiness. (It is easy to identify those who did not!)

Friday, March 22

We do well to remember that the only person who has ever completely fulfilled the ideals presented in the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus himself. As God incarnate, he presents us with the perfect human being, which both shows God to be trustworthy *and* demonstrates our inability to keep every aspect of the Law perfectly. It is in the ethical requirements of the Law that Christ's sufficiency meets our inadequacy.

Because they have similar audiences, one can read Hebrews and Matthew together. They are very Jewish in context, but focused on far more than just the Hebrew Scriptures and the Jews. In fact, Hebrews often provides us with the theology that supports the narrative of Matthew's gospel. In particular, Hebrews views Jesus as the fulfillment of all that exists in the Law and the Prophets: a better man, a better messenger, a better priest, a better sacrifice, etc.

- Today, consider what the author of Hebrews says about the humanity of Jesus in one of the following passages: Hebrews 1:1–14, 2:5–18, 4:14–5:10, 7:11–28.

- As you reflect upon your chosen passage, consider if there are not equivalents between the passage and what we have seen in Matthew 5 so far.

"To Owe"
Matthew 5:38–42

Monday, March 25

The *lex talionis* ("An eye for an eye") is one of the most often repeated commands in the Law (Exod 21:24; Lev 24:20; Deut 19:21), and it is also probably the commandment that Jesus most clearly seems to countermand. We need to understand that the purpose of this statement was to stem private vigilante justice. If there was not a legal standard for meeting out justice, people could make valuations on their own (Lev 19:17–18).

It is likely that Jesus is referencing a common listing of the assorted injuries—eye, cheek, and coat—that was current in the rabbinical discussions of the day (Basson, 2015: 155). Rabbinical literature discusses the context of vengeance and relates it to Micah 7:8, "Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love [*ḥesed*]." Judaism was divided on the application of the *lex talionis*. Some rabbis viewed vengeance as an evil. Consider how Mar b. Rabina would end his prayers: "May my soul be silent to them that curse me" (*b. Berakot* 17a). Others created complicated rules for retribution, generally reducing the actual vengeance to financial compensation (*y. Bab. Qamma* 8.1).

This kind of paradox was unacceptable to Jesus. He held that personal attacks should be addressed personally (see 18:15–20). Justice, on the other hand, was the *removal* of evil for the good of society. Vengeance is about retribution for a wrong, which in itself can be evil. This is why justice cannot be trusted to individuals but by some kind of governing authority. The *lex talionis* was meant to be justice, administered within the Law, but it had become something else.

- We have touched only briefly on the distinction between *justice* and *vengeance*. Take some time to develop thoughts on this subject. Explore the topic in Scripture and in conversation.

- Is there a difference between *offense* and *oppression*? If there are differences, how do we tell which is which (especially given the controversies of our day concerning both), and how do we respond to them?

Tuesday, March 26

It is only after Jesus starts to develop this section that we see his focus resolving not on personal affronts, but resistance to Roman authority. The discussions of being struck on the cheek (v 39) and walking a mile (v 41) in particular are dealing with the authority the Romans had over the Jews. The particular word that is translated as

"resist" in verse 39 had a long history of referring to armed resistance (Davis, 2005: 7–36, 107). This kind of armed resistance would ultimately be the downfall of Judean Judaism when they rose up against the Romans and were mercilessly crushed in the First Jewish War (AD 64–77) and resulted in the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. Historically, this was the period in which the Church became *truly* distinct from Judaism because Christians refused to join in the revolt or ally with the Romans, drawing the ire of both groups. Early Christian sources describe the decision to leave Jerusalem and Judea as "the flight to Pella." Whether the Christians actually made this flight is debated, but the narrative makes clear why the Christians chose not to remain (Bourgel, 2010: 107–38; Houwelingen, 2003: 181–200).

Time and again, the New Testament reminds believers that their calling is not to resist the world order and set up a nation but to live in the world, preaching the gospel and transforming it as salt and light do. While Judean Judaism held stubbornly to a sort of "Hebrew nationalism," the Church was trans-national, made up of Jews and Gentiles. There was no national identity for the Christians to preserve in this period. It was only after the Christianization of the Roman Empire and the development of the idea of "Christendom" in the Middle Ages that Christianity became united with authority and government, a situation that persisted well into the modern era.

- How has "Christendom" (Christianity as part of government and political identity) affected our perspective on our role in the world?

- In an increasingly post-Christian world where institutions are stripping out vestiges of 'Christendom' (often excessively), how can we alter our perspective and approach to the world to be effective agents of the gospel?

Wednesday, March 27

Verse 40 deals with someone stealing *everything* from you through legal means. This is the definition of a institutionalized injustice. The Law actually guaranteed that you couldn't take everything from someone. You had to *at least* leave them their cloak (Exod 22:26–27; Deut 24:12–13). The Law provides for fairness, so weaponizing it as a means of oppression would be the height of disregard for YHWH. Jesus's response? Give them everything.

This is the highest form of protest, submission to injustice. And it is personified in Jesus (Acts 8:32–33; cf. Isa 53:7–8; 1 Pet 3:18). Even the divine Law can be used for evil, so we cannot seek to find hope in the Law. Again, we see Jesus contrasting the powers of the world (in this case, those operating within the legal system) with his Kingdom. It is not that we are powerless to act, but that we have the power to react and choose not to. We are free to allow injustice to stand that others might see it and seek true justice.

- We have a deeply seated need for justice, and things are not dealt with properly (in our eyes), we often will fight to fix the situation. How do we know when to stand and fight and when to endure?

- Many have taken Jesus's endurance of injustice as a normative practice, adopting pacifism at a level in which they will never respond to violence. Does this accurately reflect Jesus's teaching? Why or why not?

Thursday, March 28

The discussion of being forced to walk a mile is the only piece of this discussion (vv. 38–42) that does not have any precedent in the Torah. This is because it was a matter of Roman law, not Jewish practice. A Roman soldier could force a non-citizen to carry his pack and shield for a mile (cf. Luke 3:14). This was a necessity for the soldiers, who carried significant weight and had to sometimes march 20 miles in a day, and the practice actually dated back to the Persian Empire (Hatch, 1889: 37–38).

Originally, using people along the way helped keep the soldier fresh to fight, and so it was considered a fair trade if those he was defending helped carry the burden. By Jesus's day, however, the system was being abused in many places. Later in Roman history, it would be used as a sort of "imminent domain," allowing the imperial forces to seize property and it would eventually have to be curbed by the emperor Theodosius (*Cod. Theo.* 8.5).

Incidentally, the same verb used here for "forces" (or better "compels") is also used to describe the moment when Simon of Cyrene was compelled to carry Jesus's cross (27:32). Tradition holds that Simon became a believer, and his sons became leaders in the early church (Mark 15:21; Rom 16:13). Jesus will elsewhere tell his disciples to "take up your cross" (10:38; 16:24). The believer should not have to be compelled or forced to take up Christ's burden.

- We all have things we do begrudgingly because we "have to." What is your "extra mile" for someone? Are you capable of taking up the burden for the extra mile without an expectation from the other person?

- Take a few minutes to consider Matthew 25:31–46 where Jesus discusses serving "the least of these." Can we think of the oppressive forces in our world (like the Roman soldiers were for people of Jesus's day) as "the least of these"? The most undeserving require the greatest grace. How would this influence the way you act toward others.

Friday, March 29

Jesus's point in this discussion is that integrity, real internal strength, is more important than the oaths we take or the obligations we are placed under. While it is easy to read this as an ethical code, there is an underlying theology concerning God's unchanging nature. Religious leaders of the day were essentially arguing that God

had become distant, was unreachable, and so were instituting their own standards and their own traditions to bridge the gap to God. Among many of them, they were teaching that the "faithful" were obligated to resist their Gentile oppressors.

What was novel about Jesus's approach was how he established a precedent for his own incarnation and atonement. By turning popular interpretations on their heads and illustrating shortcomings, he opened the door to the idea that the gospel would not be a "change" in God's agenda but rather the unexpected completion of it, emerging from inside "the world" as Jews and Gentiles alike came under Jesus's authority rather than coming from outside of it as a ruling elite or legalistic religious identity. God is consistent. It is just our perceptions of his revelation and work that are flawed, and our flaws which lead to misinterpretation and misapplication.

- As you prepare to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus this weekend, take a few minutes to reflect on the journey of the past seven weeks. What insights have you drawn from these discussions? Are there things you hadn't thought about? Things that you did not agree with, or perhaps just found uncomfortable to consider?

- How will you implement what you have seen/are considering? In the second week, we discussed being salt and light—influencing our world for Jesus. Have you had any changes to your thinking about how to do that?

Part 2

"Love Your Enemies"
Matthew 5:43–48

Monday, April 1

Who is my neighbor (*plēsion*)? Who is my enemy (*eḥthros*)? Jesus's teaching on loving your neighbor (19:19, 22:34–40; cf. Lev 19:18) is repeated by the apostles (Rom 13:9; Gal 5:14; James 2:8). It may be called one of his characteristic positions, and yet here Jesus redefines the idea of a neighbor and an enemy, blurring the line between them. In fact, neighbor and enemy are defined not by God but by us. We choose to treat one person one way and another person another way. Even the enemies of Christ are given opportunities to draw near to him (Rom 5:10; Phil 3:18).

Jewish sectarian literature is particular revealing on the subject of enemies. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, there are a number of commentaries that encourage one to love those within the sect and hate the outsiders. Take for example, this passage from "The Rule of the Community" (*serek hayad*):

> "In order to welcome all those who freely volunteer to carry out God's decrees into the covenant of kindness; in order to be united in the counsel of God and walk in perfection in his sight; in order to love all the sons of light, each one according to his lot in God's plan, and to detest all the sons of darkness, each one in accordance with his guilt in God's vindication" (1QS 1:7–11 from Martínez 1999: 71).

Another fragment (4Q525, frag. 10) makes a distinction between "the enemy" (Heb. *'ôyeb*) and "the loved" (*'âhab*). These two words look very similar in Hebrew, especially when written the way they appear in the fragment (אויב and אוהב). For the sectarians, the distinction must be made carefully. Certainly, the Hebrew Scriptures called for the faithful to reject idolatry and paganism, but the idea of "detesting" those outside the sect ("the sons of darkness") goes beyond rejecting sin and those who follow it. The rest of the Rule makes it quite plain that only a special, chosen few were worthy of true kindness.

- What are some reasons that we choose to consider someone a neighbor? What about an enemy?

- Why do you think that when people become sectarian or cliquish, they tend to become more likely to identify "outsiders" as hostile?

Tuesday, April 2

Jesus specifically refers to his audience as "sons of the heavenly Father" (v 45), language which seems to answer the labels like "the sons of light" (see yesterday's discussion) and other such titles used by Jewish sects of the time. A "son of the heavenly Father" loves his enemies. He does not simply tolerate them, but loves them. The apostle John later argues that you cannot love God if you do not love others (1 John 4:20).

Even the Jews who were not part of a sect still viewed the Roman power as "the enemy" and that included anyone who worked for them. This may have had a particular poignance for Matthew, who was trained as a tax farmer (10:3) and therefore was part of the Roman machine. What we often do not think about is that the early church was composed of "natural enemies." Jews and Gentiles, Greeks and barbarians, free men and slaves, were being drawn together, and this required the suspension of hostility and division (Eph 2:14–15). It was not "normal" or easy for these groups, which had always seen themselves as distinct, to grow into something new.

- Tell of a time when God led you to see someone who was "outside" of your comfort zone as someone God loves. What challenges exist in accepting those who God has accepted?

- Who might be the modern day "Romans" that you tend to see as outsiders or enemies?

Wednesday, April 3

The sun rises. Rains fall. The sun breaks through the clouds. Every person experiences these natural phenomena. It is not like the righteous experience these things while the wicked live in gloom and darkness. This kind of contrast makes good fiction (Mordor from *Lord of the Rings*, anyone?) but they are not expressed in reality. In reality, a wicked man enjoys exactly the same climactic conditions that a righteous man does. If the rest of God's creation does not treat people differently based on perception of enmity, why should we?

Going all the way back to the beginning of the sermon, Jesus argues that people must see our good works (5:16). These must be good works directed toward our enemies. No one would watch someone being kind to a friend while ignoring needs among their enemies and think they should glorify the Father. This is why Jesus introduces this "essential paradox" of loving your enemies. There is something greater than our own feelings or comfort at play here, as loving your enemies reflects the true character of the Creator God (France, 2007: 251). Love is much bigger than emotion. It is a loyalty to truth, even with those who we might consider enemies. This means both compassion and chastening, both generous tolerance and bold truth.

- Are there contemporary situations in which the Church has "dropped the ball" in terms of loving our enemies? Discuss some of these situations and how we might have handled them better.

- The kind of love Jesus is preaching is much bigger than our society's definition of love. How can we live this out in practical terms with those who see us as their enemies?

Thursday, April 4

Jesus makes the point that it is not a big deal to just "greet the brothers" (v 47), another possible reference to sectarians in Jewish society who viewed themselves as an exclusive brotherhood. Is it enough to be generous and hospitable to those who consider "like us"? The ever-expanding sphere of salvation requires that we be conscious of expanding our concept of fellowship. This fellowship, this shared experience is extended to our very enemies. Even enemies are invited into the salvation of Christ and the unity that results.

It is not the action of greeting but the *object*. It is easy to love the ones you already love. It is the action of loving the unlovable that is personified in Christ. We feel perfectly justified in treating our enemies as somehow less than deserving of our compassion and generosity, but again Jesus entered a world that was, on the whole, hostile to him (John 1:11–12). This hostility provides much of the framing narrative of all four gospels, with Jesus being rejected and treated as an enemy for a multitude of reasons. Through it all, Jesus continues to include those who consider him as enemies within his audience. He challenges their suppositions and biases, debates their theology, and in the end, still offered himself up to them in the belief that his death and resurrection would offer redemption to those who were willing to kill him (Luke 23:34).

- All humans have a way of delineating between friends and enemies, although we all draw the line differently. From your perspective, what makes overcoming the line between friend and enemy so difficult?

- Tell of a time when you had a hostile or contentious relationship that you discovered was founded not on reality but on perceptions and misunderstanding. How did you resolve this issue? If you have not yet resolved it, why does it linger?

Friday, April 5

Throughout the arguments, Jesus has been attempting to correct what Jeffrey Gibbs once described as Judaism's "twisted fruit" grown through a "misuse of the canonical soil" (Gibbs, 2006: 306). Jesus concludes his discussion with an indirect quote from God's covenant with Abraham (Gen 17:1) that summarizes not only the specific section, but the entire antithetical argument Jesus has made (5:21–48). In a climate where armed revolt was an option that was on the table, Jesus promotes a divine standard of perfection that exceeds the need to "right the wrongs" done by the perceived enemies.

"In Matthew, the concept of a higher righteousness is connected with sayings about *fulfilling* the law, not abolishing it (5:17–19). With only one exception, the antitheses do not reject the law, but only the way the law is usually interpreted" (Furnish, 1972: 48). The Pharisaical interpretation of enemies seems to have followed the sectarian view. They, whether political rivals or personal adversaries, were enemies and therefore worthy of our disdain. If they were enemies of your particular sect, they must be enemies of God. Jesus, on the other hand,

adopts a view that is expressed in the Proverbs, which belonged to the "Writings," the last of the three sections of the Hebrew Scriptures.

> *Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles, lest YHWH see it and be displeased, and turn away his anger from him.* (*Prov 24:17*)
>
> *If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink, for you will heap burning coals on his head, and YHWH will reward you.* (*Prov 25:17*)

Notice that neither of these passages remove the guilt that an enemy might have by virtue of his actions, but it removes the responsibility of dealing with this guilt from you and places it in God's hands. For a believer to treat an enemy with disdain or hatred is to become an enemy of God yourself.

- We might sometimes feel justified in disdaining and mistreating those who mistreat or abuse us. This is a slippery slope. What more serious situations are opened up once we begin to view someone of worth of our disdain?

- Can you disagree with someone without disdaining or disrespecting them? How do you safeguard against slipping into condescension and disdain?

"Public Righteousness"
Matthew 6:1–6

Monday, April 8

In the previous section, Jesus dealt with the teachings of the Judaism of his day and how they fell short of God's righteousness. Here, he turns his attention to the public performance of righteousness, in particular alms-giving and prayer. These are what we might call "abundance" acts. People give alms to the poor out of their bounty; and public prayer is usually something done by people with prestige and a reputation for good speech and devout behavior.

It is tempting to view the public performance of righteousness as equivalent to righteousness. It looks good, so it must be good, right? Given that God's affirmation of our righteousness is immaterial and spiritual, who would not be tempted by the applause of other people who are pursuing righteousness? This is why Jesus tells his disciples they have to "beware" (*proseḥō*) or, perhaps more accurately, "turn your mind to awareness" of their motivations behind their good works (Morris, 1992: 136). While our good works are a light by which others can

see the Father, they can also be reflective of an attitude of self-idolatry. In the end, defining righteousness solely by the public acts of worship is no different than Aaron declaring a golden calf to be YHWH (Exod 32:4–5).

- Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you were more focused on the external appearance rather than internal reality? How did you go about fixing the situation?

- Why do you think people tend to be so willing to accept the external, public rather than exploring what is really going on?

Tuesday, April 9

We have all seen them. The internet is filled with the viral videos of people surprising some homeless person with a wad of cash or doing some other good work. These videos get shared hundreds of thousands of times, and on the surface they seem to be about getting people to do stuff for others. What most of us don't realize is that those views translate immediately into cash for the influencer who owns the channel. For an investment of a few hundred dollars, he or she might make thousands in ad revenue. In other words, the public act of righteousness is a way to build one's own personal wealth.

In Jesus's day, there was no structure within Judaism for structured care for the poor (Luz, 2007: 299). Almsgiving was largely left to the individual, and so it was not uncommon for the wealthy members of the Jewish ruling class to be sure that they advertised the way they provided for the poor. There is no evidence that they blasted real trumpets, and it may be that Jesus is speaking idiomatically of some kind of loud public proclamations, self-advertising that attracted attention. The end result was the same. Others who viewed this rabbi or that lawyer as being particularly righteous would be more inclined to patronize them.

The underlying motivation was *not* compassion for the poor but rather advertising one's piety and promoting the perception of compassion among others. Throughout Scripture, there is this idea that true holiness is not always immediately recognizable. Thus, Moses had a speech impediment and yet became the lawgiver. David was not even included in the candidates for king, and yet would become a man after God's own heart.

- Looking at the religious landscape of our world, it does not take much to see people doing the "right thing" for the wrong reasons. How can we personally safeguard our thinking to minimize the wrong priorities?

- It is hard to get a hearing without a little branding and advertising. How does the church strike the balance of being visible without becoming consumed with branding and self-promotion?

Wednesday, April 10

The "you" in this passage is singular, meaning that this passage is dealing with the behavior of individual believers and not the church as a collective group. Each individual is responsible for his or her own heart condition. Whether we are with other believers or not, there is accountability to the Father in heaven (vv 1, 4, 6, 16).

It is worth noting that while Jesus makes it clear that there is a *difference* between the scribes/pharisees and his followers, their practices are very much the same (Sim, 2000: 200–1). Each individual believer was still commanded to give alms and pray, but Jesus makes a strong distinction based on motivation because this is not a community activity but an individual one. A believer can have the right motivations for an action, even when they are in the midst of others who have the wrong motivations.

- This point speaks to the presence of true believers in denominations or churches which may have correct motivation or beliefs. Do you believe a true believer can remain in a group that has obvious errors and still be right with God? Why or why not?

- We can overplay the idea of individual responsibility. Some groups have used personal guilt as a tool for manipulating people. At the same time, we are individually responsible for our actions and the motivations that underly them. What passages of Scripture speak to the balance of individual accountability?

Thursday, April 11

There are a handful of interpretations of Jesus's statement about your left hand not knowing what your right hand is doing. Some believe that it is tied to an ancient figure of speech for a friend, in the sense that it is a private, intimate knowledge. Only you know what you're doing. Others, however, maintain that the idea was to give with one hand because you could do that discreetly while giving with both hands would be considered a formal offering (Gundry, 1982: 102–3).

One of the less discussed aspects of this level of privacy is that it removes our need to know whether the person we are helping is "worth" helping. All of us have, at some time, encountered someone in need who we felt did not deserve to be helped. It could be because of their lifestyle or their attitude or any number of other factors, but we look at a person in need and worry about what they might do with what we give them or the impression others might have if we helped "their kind" of person.

- Has there been a time in your life when you were the person in need who people refused to help? If so, how did it feel?

- What steps can you take in your life to ensure that your "left hand does not know what your right hand is doing" in your helping others?

Friday, April 12

If we are helping people in secret where only God can see it, how will others see our "good works" and glorify him (5:16)? Isn't this a paradox? It depends how you define "good works." We tend to think of "good works" as a list of moral behaviors, things that get noticed as being "good." In the Judaism of Jesus's day, this was certainly true. The Pharisees in particular could provide a lengthy list of "good works" that one did as a fulfillment of Torah. This is not, however what Jesus had in mind.

This kind of thinking about "good works" operates within an honor/shame way of thinking. "Good works" bring honor to us, while inactivity brings shame. Therefore, the believer heaps up honor by performing "good works." It makes sense in our modern world, just as it did in the ancient one (Waetgen, 2017: 87).

It is useful to think of "good works" in a different way. The word "works" means actions or movement. It is not a prescribed list of activities but rather those actions which reflect the heart of God in us. They are therefore varied, ranging from something easy to understand like charity to something far more complex like friendship or promoting unity among the Church. Since they would be in alignment with God, and not man, good works might also include correction of sin, reproving of error, and even the rejection of accepted "Christian" behaviors or ideas which are not in keeping with Scripture.

- How does changing "good works" to "actions that reflect the heart of God" alter your perspective on Christian conduct?

- The temptation to define righteousness and holiness as a cumulative total of "good works" is strong. What steps can we take in our relationships with others to ensure that our "good works" are not the primary criteria for evaluating our worth as believers?

"The Lord's Prayer"
Matthew 6:5–15

Monday, April 15

The previous section has a very simply structure, contrasting the hypocrisy of outward righteousness with internal righteous, but this is interrupted here by an extended discussion of prayer that seems so out of place that some commentators insist (incorrectly, in my opinion) that it must be a later addition to the text (Davies and Allison, 1988: 574–76; Hagner, 2000: 137–38). Rather than being a late addition, this section is the center of Jesus's sermon. He has been working his way deeper into the thinking of his audience, questioning core behaviors and attitudes. Here, he gets to the fundamental concept of righteousness—one's relationship to God.

One can *appear* to be righteous to others by doing the right things at the right times, but there is no faking the true communication with God. This is the "secret" which Jesus has repeated. God sees and hears the innermost attitudes of the individual. How we pray says a lot about how we see ourselves in relationship to our God. Consider the two actions that appear before this passage (almsgiving) and after it (fasting). When giving alms, one is giving of what we possess. When fasting, one is denying reception of something we might need. Outflow and inflow—but they must pass through you, the person. How do you sustain yourself? The Word of God becomes fundamental to the flow of God's grace to both others and ourselves (4:4), and we hear the Word of God in prayer.

- Why does Jesus make such a big deal about God "seeing in secret"? Are there times when the visibility of our actions are important for glorifying God?

- As you read the Lord's Prayer, what sections stand out to you? Are there components of it that have had different significance to you at different times? Why do you think that might be?

Tuesday, April 16

The passage we call "the Lord's Prayer" was probably something Jesus repeated often and so was very familiar to the disciples in a few variations (Carson, 1984: 168). It appears in two completely different contexts in the gospels. Like all of Jesus's words, the original was likely in Aramaic or an Aramaized dialect of Hebrew, as spoken in Galilee. There is even a word (*epiousios*, "daily") that ancient authors could not find used anywhere else in Greek literature. It is perhaps a translation of the Aramaic *missathi* ("bread sufficient for me"), which appears in some Aramaic discussions of Proverbs 30:8, "feed me with the bread that is needful (or necessary) for me" (Black, 1954: 203–5).

Living the life of an itinerant rabbi, Jesus was depending upon the largesse of others. Mark hints that there was a group of Galilean women who essentially financed Jesus's ministry (Mark 15:41). Even in his death, these women were the ones who went to the tomb to prepare his body and so heard of his resurrection. Those who took care of his needs did so because God had provided them with the means to do so, and he took that divine role very seriously. Jesus was provided for, but he was careful to organize his prayer as thankful to God for providing this sustenance.

- Do you find yourself forgetting that all provision is from God? How can you express gratitude to those God has used to provide, even if you have a distaste for them (for example, a boss you don't care for)?

- In the case of the Lord's Prayer, the language Jesus uses is less important than the principle he teaches. Do you find that the principle of "daily bread" has many ways to express it? What is your "go to" way of expressing thanks for the food/sustenance God provides?

Wednesday, April 17

It is easy to misunderstand Jesus's reference to "empty phrases" (or "vain repetition" in the KJV) in verse 7. The Greek word is *battalogeō,* and it is a rare case of a hybrid of the Aramaic *bṭlh'* (literally "emptiness") with the Greek *logeō* ("to speak"). It is likely that in translating Jesus's original words, Matthew chose not to use the common Greek word *barbaros* (which we get "barbarian" from) because that term had an implied xenophobic, condescending meaning (cf. 1 Cor 14:11). In its place, Matthew refers instead to meaningless words, or prayers that have no weight. It is not their repetition that makes them worthless. The prayers are empty because they are aimed at the wrong gods, and they seek the "reward" of an answer rather than being focused on the God to whom they should be addressed. In short, they are prayers devoid of true worship because those who pray them believe the words themselves have magical power or influence on the supernatural (Quarles, 2011: 183–84).

Although his gospel comes from a Jewish perspective, Matthew is careful not to exclude the Gentile "barbarians" from true worship. It is not the Jewish prayers that are good and godly, but prayers that are filled with meaning and worship. Jewish prayers can be just as filled with "magic" words and attempts to manipulate the divine as Gentile prayers can be. Jesus addresses the mindset, and he opens the door of prayer to anyone who prays earnestly and worshipfully.

- 1 Timothy 2:1–4 offers four types of prayer: supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings. Prayers and thanksgivings are fairly self-explanatory. Supplication is a request for God to do or provide something. Intercessions are asking God to remove a problem or situation. Consider your own prayer life. Do you tend to focus on one particular category of prayer? How can you balance your prayer life across those four categories?

- Is there someone you pray with regularly? Not everyone is comfortable praying in groups, and that is ok. If you are one who prays alone most often, do you have someone you discuss prayer with regularly? Or have agreed to pray for one another?

Thursday, April 18

Have you ever noticed that the entirety of the Lord's Prayer is in the imperative? There is not a single subjective petition. It is not, "If you will give us this day our daily bread." The text speaks confidently of God's provision as Lord. "Give us this day our daily bread." It is a foregone conclusion that God will provide what we need, not because we ask but because he is God indeed. Likewise, it is not "we hope we can stay away from temptation," but rather, "Lead us not into temptation." If we are trusting him to lead, it is true that we will be tempted but we are given the capacity to overcome, and endure. Our deliverance is assured when our faith is fully in Him.

For Jesus, prayer is not an appeal to a distant God for some kind of special treatment. It is a recognition of the revealed nature of God. As a God who revealed himself and honors the covenants he makes with his people, God does not expect us to *beg* him for things which he has promised. Still, we are reminded that as a God of

covenants, God expects us to be as charitable and compassionate as he is. This means our prayers are not only for our daily bread but also for the strength to release any sentiments of vindictiveness or entitlement we might have toward other people. It is God's will to provide us with our daily bread, but also for us to forgive our debtors.

- How do you pray for God's provision ("daily bread") in your life? How often do you pray for provision as compared to forgiveness and your attitude toward others?

- Like any relationship, prayer is about balance. Consider adding the element of silence to your prayer life. After making a request or expressing thanks or interceding for someone, sit in silence before God. You're not necessarily listening or anything, just being still (Ps 37:7; 46:10).

Friday, April 19

The reciprocity in verses 14–15 indicates our own attitude toward prayer, not the nature of God. How can we possibly pray sincerely for God's forgiveness when we don't understand forgiveness enough to live it out in our lives. Forgiveness of wrongs is *always* within our power, because forgiveness is a choice we make. Unforgiveness and holding on to wrongs is also a choice we make. Both letting go and clinging tightly are choices we make and can unmake. It is a bit of a paradox, but we cannot truly understand what we are asking God to do in our lives until we are willing to do it in our own.

When I was a child, my parents would make me and my sisters apologize to one another if we did something to them. Often the apology was mumbled or presented without true sincerity. When that happened, my father would ask me, "What are you sorry for?" It was only when we spoke the offense that it became real and we could truly ask forgiveness or forgive. In a similar sense, when we articulate what we are forgiving others for, we often illuminate what we also need forgiven. Unforgiveness is almost always tied to our inability to see and speak the offense. In our minds, it is too embarrassing or too hurtful. But one of the underlying themes of the Sermon on the Mount is a wholeness of being and action (Pennington, 2017: 185). How can we receive forgiveness if we do not practice it so we understand it?

- Do you have an area of unforgiveness in your life? If you honestly evaluate how you have handled that situation, has the unforgiveness had an adverse effect on your life?

- Have you ever experienced forgiveness from another person that was so honest and sincere as to leave a mark on your thinking? Describe how it has impacted you.

"Fasting"
Matthew 6:16–18

Monday, April 22

Hypocritical fasting is something that was condemned long before Jesus preached this sermon (Isa 58:1–12; Joel 2:12–17). Because fasting is something that isn't necessarily visible, the Jews would practice something we might call "praise-fishing," dropping hints for others to notice one's piety. It was not enough to fast, which God would see, but they must also be *seen* or *known* to be fasting. As with the other practices in this passage (almsgiving and prayer), there was a tendency toward observing outward behavior as equivalent to inward righteousness.

Why do people do this? Because they know they will get attention. We tend to look around for others who are doing praiseworthy things. People "praise-fish" because we are biting. Helping our brothers and sisters *not* do things for applause begins with us not looking to praise people for appearances. "Extraordinary" acts of obedience and service should be ordinary for the believer, whether it is noticed or not.

- Have you ever found yourself "praise-fishing"? If so, have you ever had someone call you out on it? How did that go?

- It has been said that "character is who you are in the dark." How do you become the same follower of Christ whether you are being seen or not?

Tuesday, April 23

The particular type of fasting being described here was probably fasting of lamentation. The people fasting would "disfigure" their faces so they were obviously lamenting. The Greek word is *skuthrōpoi*, literally "darkened appearance." Public lament was very common in STJ, and it seems likely that "disfigure" would be more appropriately be translated as "hide" since the Greek word (ἀφανίζω) is the opposite of "appear" or "be visible." In other words, these people were making their "hidden" faces very obvious to everyone, brooding and advertising their piety.

Jesus continues to criticize this kind of public piety because it has so many manifestations. He implies that this kind of thing is superficial and it does not reflect the actual spiritual condition of the people acting them out. He is not condemning public acts of lament. Jesus engages in these himself (Matt 11:21; 23:13). The issue at hand is the lamentation to be noticed. In order to draw attention to their lament, they act in a way that draws attention to themselves rather than that which they are lamenting.

- Where do you believe *genuine lament* comes from? What is its purpose? How is it different from lament or emotional display for affection?

Wednesday, April 24

It is not often that we find Jesus fasting, probably because he was so careful not to make it obvious. He does, however, express a form of fast at the Lord's Table when he tells the disciples he will not drink of the cup again until he returns (26:26–29; cf. Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:18–20). In that situation, Jesus's fast is one of expectation rather than lament. He looks forward to their reunion with the faithful. While we cannot be certain, he may have had in mind passages like Isaiah 25:6–9 and 55:1–2.

> *On this mountain YHWH of the hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is YHWH; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."* (Isa 25:6–9)

> *"Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food."* (Isa 55:1–2)

In this case, the abstinence Jesus expresses is meant to represent eager anticipation. Such fasting was quite common in the ancient world, where rich foods were often only enjoyed at the harvest. This is why the great feasts of the Torah always include massive meals. Yom Kippur was actually the only day where fasting was commanded (Lev 16:29–31; 23:27–32; Num 29:7). For most of the year, people ate enough to sustain themselves. At the harvests, however, they drank and ate and partied. It was not gluttony but celebration of God's goodness.

- Have you ever tried fasting as an anticipation of something that is coming soon? As a discipline of preparation?

- If not, consider trying it at some point. Perhaps it is something small or something big.

Thursday, April 25

Following on yesterday's discussion, fasting was a much more familiar thing in the ancient world than it is today. Pretty much everywhere in the Roman world, bread was about 70% of people's caloric intake. It was eaten with olive oil, and was accompanied by a fish or something like that (14:17). Things like fruit were considered a treat, but they were seasonal and if the trees were not tended, they did not yield fruit (21:18–22). We often think of the Roman era as a time of excess and feasting, but that was only for a very small elite. The modern American would be surprised by how small and unvaried meals were for most people. We would be out of place indeed in a world where barley is considered a tasty road trip treat (Luke 6:1).

What is a fad diet today (intermittent fasting) was a necessary reality for people in Jesus's day. Therefore fasting was not meant to be a denial of luxury or pleasure, but of necessity. The practice was generally connected to (1) mourning, (2) a component of prayer, or (3) in preparation for an encounter of some kind (Lambert, 2007: 478). It served a key function of focusing attention on the spiritual realm, perhaps a means of obtaining clarity in a confusing situation. The fast was not a spiritual ends to itself, but the temporary surrender of a physical necessity for a greater spiritual truth.

- While food is the most common type of fast, it is not the only thing that we can fast from. What other types of fasts might you consider valuable as a part of helping you focus on spiritual things?

- Like fasting, there are practices in our world that become advertised "image" matters rather than spiritual disciplines. The one that comes to mind is worship music, which often is more about the performance than the divine object. How can the Church better focus on encountering the divine rather than the "appearance" of the acts?

Friday, April 26

Jesus tells his listeners to "anoint your head and wash your face" (6:17). This is contrasted with disfiguring your faith and publicly declaring your fasting. Instead, you should go about your regular everyday habits. Wash your face. Brush your hair. Do not hint that you're doing anything differently. The fast is made a "secret" thing because not everything about our relationship with God is public. The private spiritual devotion should run much deeper and stronger than that which is seen in public. Jesus does not ban fasting. As D. A. Carson puts it, "The solution is not to abolish fasting but to set it within a biblical framework and sincerely to covet God's blessing" (Carson, 1984: 176).

- Should the believer be concerned about their "Sunday best"? Is there spiritual merit to the attitude of making a clear, visible distinction between "worship" and other days?

- Again, we have to ask how others will see our "good works and glorify your father in heaven" if we make everything secret. How do we balance the visible and invisible aspects of spiritual devotion?

"Fear & Anxiety"
Matthew 6:19–43

Monday, April 29

Although Jesus uses physical treasure as his touchpoint in this part of the sermon, he is speaking about the idea of accumulating spiritual value or equity. He appears to be interpreting and applying a principle from Proverbs (Prov 10:2, 11:4). We may actually have indications of the influence of Jesus's parable in the life of Monobazus II, a first century AD king of Adiabene (a small kingdom in Mesopotamia under the Parthian empire). According to ancient sources, his family had converted to Judaism around AD 30 (Jos. *Ant.* 20.95–96). References to this Jewish monarchy are scant, but their faith has some peculiarities. Like the Christians in Antioch, his mother contributed aid when Jerusalem was in famine (Acts 11:27–30). There are also hints that she took the "Nazirite" vow (*m. Nazir.* 19b.8). In the Talmud, Monobazus seems to present his own life in terms similar to Jesus's teaching here in Matthew 6.

> "My ancestors stored on earth and I stored in heaven…I stored away in a place where no other could reach it…My ancestors stored in this world and I stored for the world to come." (*y. Pe'ah* 1:1 [Basser, 2009: 183])

The Talmud reports Monozabus's words as if they are extraordinary and unusual. Although only appearing in Jewish sources, this may hint at the influence of Jesus's teachings not just in the Levant but even as far away as the Parthian empire. When Luke presents the same material to a Gentile audience, he presents it in a much more Gentile context (Luke 12:19–21) showing how this particular articulation would have resonated with Matthew's Jewish audience. It also demonstrates that Jesus seems to have been pointing out the errors of the religious elite, who attempted to accumulate both physical and spiritual treasures here on earth.

- All us find ourselves focused on this idea of accumulating "rewards" and "treasures" here on earth. It feels good when others notice our works. Are there ways to praise goodness and righteousness here without it being about the accumulation of "treasure"?

- What are some healthy forms of affirmation we can employ as we observe others growing in their faith? What checks can we be adding to our thinking to avoid the traps the religious leaders had fallen into.

Tuesday, April 30

Notice how Jesus moves from the heart (21) to the eye (22). He had drawn a similar line in 5:27–30 speaking about lust and adultery. In a very real sense, lust and greed come from the same motivations or desires. Lust is the accumulation of *people* and sensual desire for one's self, while greed is the accumulation of wealth and the financial desire to enrich yourself. The eye is supposed to be the light of the body, letting in a vision of the world as it is, rather than as we wish it to be. If we are blinded or darkened by desire and greed, then we are truly in the dark.

Jesus contrasts a healthy (*haplous*) eye with a wicked or evil (*ponēros*) eye. While "healthy" is a reasonable translation, the word *haplous* comes from the idea of a singleness of character. The surface is the same as the underlying matter. In other words, Jesus is arguing against ulterior motives and hidden agendas. The citizen of the kingdom does not look at a task and try to figure out what value it might have to him. He values the works of God because they are the works of God, without seeking a "side hustle." The issue is not what the eye *sees*, but rather what the eye allows us to *want* secretly from what we see.

- Tell of an encounter you have had with someone who had an ulterior motive. Is it ever a pleasant experience?

- How can we discipline ourselves to have healthy (or sincere) eyes when it comes to the works of the Kingdom?

Wednesday, May 1

In Numbers 15:39–40, God warned Israel about the dangers of "following your heart." In fact, it is put in no uncertain terms. They are warned "not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which are inclined to whore after." The Hebrew word translated here as "whore after" (*znh*) is unequivocal. Idolatry and sin are the end result of following our hearts without tempering and testing our desires against the word of God. Jesus even refers to the eye in this passage (22–23), indicating he had this Numbers passage in mind when he presented this teaching.

Treasures in this world are too easily lost (corrupted, stolen). On top of that, the standard of what is "enough" is always changing. We all know there is the danger of "market loss," what might be equivalent to what Jesus says about moths and vermin. Do you know why you had to use 1" margins all the way around your papers in school? It comes from the practice of wide margins in old manuscripts. It was assumed that animals would consume the outer edges of the books while they were being stored. Printing the text with a wide margin was a safeguard against the exact kind of loss Jesus is talking about here. Heavenly riches have no corrupting influences, because they are not tangible currency but rather the notice and grace of God.

- What things in this world are you afraid of losing? We all have them. How does this passage speak to those concerns?

- Do you find yourself building in "market loss" into your spiritual life? This might take the form of not fully investing in ministry or people because you think they might not be worth the effort? How do you correct this tendency?

Thursday, May 2

It might seem out of place to include the passage on worry (or anxiety) with the preceding passage about rewards and treasures, but Jesus is expanding the same point. Grammatically, Matthew connects the two with a particular conjunction (*dia touto*) often translated into English as "therefore," which is setting up this connection (Quarles, 2017: 67). The word rendered as "be anxious" or "worry" is *merimnaō*. It is not a common Greek word. In his parable of the seed, Jesus notes how this kind of anxiety chokes out the work of God (13:22). It is usually associated with the everyday concerns of life (1 Cor 7:33). Later, both Paul and Peter expanded upon Jesus's teaching here.

> *The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* (*Phil 4:5–7*)

> *Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.* (*1 Pet 5:6–7*)

The sense we get from Jesus's teaching is *not* that the everyday is not important, but rather that we must approach it with the perspective that God is the provider and we can trust that he will meet our needs (Gen 22:14). So much of our anxiety tends to stem from extending ourselves *beyond* God's provision and then falling back on God hoping he will meet needs we created for ourselves.

- In what ways have you experienced anxiety or worry choking out your future growth?

- Have you managed to overcome the worry? Is so, how did you do it?

Friday, May 3

Throughout the sermon, Jesus employs a number of metaphors and everyday illustrations that served to get his point across. Here, however, he invites the listeners to consider elements they could observe in their environment. In particular, he invites them to observe the natural rhythms of the birds (*peteinon*) and the lilies (*krinon*) of the field—the wildflowers. Both are elements of Galilean life. The Hula Valley, just north of the Sea of Galilee serves as a stopping point for African and Asian migratory birds. In the early spring, over half a billion

birds over 500 different species of birds arrive and rest there as they migrate to their summer homes. In the same season, vast fields of wildflowers cover the Galilean hills and the Golan Heights, something that is not seen elsewhere in Israel.

We often forget that Jesus spoke in the *real world*. It is likely that at the moment Jesus called attention to the birds of the air, it was because a flock of birds flew overhead. When he talks about the wildflowers, his listeners may have been surrounded by a rainbow carpet of anemones, cyclamens, and lupines—all flowers native to the Galilee that blossom together in the spring. Jesus's teaching resonated not only for the generations that followed but for the immediate audience. And Matthew's audience, many of whom were Galilean Jews, would have understood his illustration as well. Contrasting the natural beauty of the Galilee with Solomon and the Jerusalem temple was undoubtedly intentional.

- When Jesus says, "seek the kingdom of God first," do you think he is shifting focus off all the religious matters he has been dealing with and onto the creation around his listeners? How would their immediate surroundings have helped them understand what he was teaching?

- At times, Christianity can become so institutionalized and ordered that we forget that nature is not like that. God's created order is much more complex and interconnected, lacking "theological rigor" but nonetheless revealing God's hand at work. This weekend, take a few minutes or an hour or a day to simply be *in* God's creation without analysis or criticism. Receive the message of grace observable in the natural world.

"Unto Others"
Matthew 7:1–14

Monday, May 6

Jesus is trying to get his audience to shift their perspective away from their own holiness, their own righteousness, their own anxieties and to *see* others. The following chapter will address this in practical terms, but Jesus corrects the audience's perspective, and only then does he call them to action. So often, we want to have a list of actions, a spiritual to-do list that take care of whatever spiritual need it is that we might have.

Jesus uses the word *hypocrite* four times in this sermon. Within the context of the sermon, he has repeatedly established that many religious people perform "righteous" acts for the wrong reasons. Here, he asks his listeners not to judge by the standard that the hypocrites use. In fact, he addresses these religious people and their hypocrisy, calling them not to judge or reject those who do not conform to their "measure" (*metron*) of

righteousness. He does not make a universal prohibition on evaluating the morality of behavior, but rather he demands that righteousness be measured in terms of conformity to God's will and the Kingdom rather than human standards of appropriate religion.

- When you think of hypocrisy, what behaviors come to mind? Do you find the term tends to get used incorrectly or too broadly?

- How would you, as a Christian, respond to accusations of hypocrisy in your life?

Tuesday, May 7

What did Jesus mean when he talked about casting pearls before swine and giving holy things to dogs? He seems to be offering a contrast. A hypocrite can be judgmental based on human standards, but on the other extreme, we can desecrate the holy when we treat it as nothing, as something to be discarded. Both extremes are dangerous. Balancing honest authenticity with righteous discernment can be difficult.

Dogs and pigs were among the most unclean creatures in STJ. As most people know, pigs were not kosher and Jews were forbidden to keep them as livestock. Dogs were not kept as pets but rather were viewed as scavengers that "eat the bones of the sanctuary when the flesh is still on them" (4Q394 frag. 8 col. 4.8; 396 frag. 1 col. 1.9). They were therefore not allowed near any holy things. If a sacrificial animal was presented to the priests and found to have a flaw or blemish, the priests would throw it to the dogs of the city (*m. Tem. 6.5; b. Bek. 15a*). This may be what is behind Jesus's reference.

- Hypocrisy can be both pretended righteousness and disregard for the holy. How have you seen the latter type of hypocrisy practiced in our modern world?

- How do you maintain the balance between discernment and authenticity in your own spiritual life? What disciplines have you put in place to ensure you do not err to either side?

Wednesday, May 8

The triplet in verse 7 shows a submission to Christ. To ask, one must believe the person we are asking has the power to give. To seek, we must believe that which we are seeking can be found. To knock, we must go to the place where the person with the power can be found and commit. In other words, the capacity for answered prayer exists *beyond our means*. We can no more cause a prayer to be answered than we can provide for ourselves something we do not possess, find a place we do not have a map to or enter a door which we are not standing in front of. Like the Lord's Prayer, this passage entrusts the fulfillment of promises to God rather than crediting it to our ability to maintain a righteous enough attitude to make it happen for ourselves.

We can look back to Jesus's statement about empty repetition of prayers (6:7). We are not heard because of who we are and the nature of our requests. We are heard because of who God is and because we submit to his will, praying only for what he promises. God does not give us favors to use. He grants us the capacity to do his will. This is a sacred trust that requires much of us, namely the surrender of our own agendas and wants. This is a hard truth.

- Have you found yourself praying for things that you now realize were selfish or out of God's will? How did you correct your path?

- Consider Jesus's analogy of a father providing for his children. What methods do we use to teach our children what is appropriate to ask for, what is "theirs" to claim from us? Does that apply to us as well when it comes to requesting things from God?

Thursday, May 9

Do verses 7–8 teach that Christians can claim *anything* in faith and God will give it to them? Hardly. Jesus has emphasizes time and again in the sermon that the righteous are in conformity with the will of God. A righteous person therefore would not ask for something contrary to God's will, and if he does, he is aware of the reason why it is not given to him. We cannot take these verses and isolate them from the rest of the message. Notice that Jesus's illustration mentions bread, a reference back to "daily bread" in his model prayer (6:11). He therefore places the idea of asking/receiving within the sphere of a humble prayer in keeping with the rest of the message.

But Jesus is not really talking about prayer anyway. That is the introduction to the core idea, which is in verse 12. As he has done throughout the sermon, Jesus "flips the script" and points out that the kingdom is not about what you ask God for but rather how your treatment of others reflects God's treatment of you. God is generous to you, within his will. You should be generous to others, considering how you would want to be treated.

- How does thinking of the "golden rule" (7:12) as a reflection of God's treatment of us change your perspective on it?

- If the purpose of the Law and the Prophets is to reveal God's will, how does following this "golden rule" fulfill that purpose? Consider how the verse fits in with the Beatitudes as well, since Jesus draws a line from the behavior of his disciples to his own fulfillment of the Law and Prophets?

Friday, May 10

The conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount comes in the form of three pairs: two kinds of paths or gates (7:13–14), two kinds of prophets (7:15–23), and two kinds of foundations (7:24–27). This dichotomy has existed throughout the sermon, but in these final chapters it becomes very evident. The readers are commanded to *choose* one option or the other. Each of the illustrations operate a bit differently, but they all contrast self-centered internal attitudes with submission to Christ.

The Greek word translated as "narrow" is *stenos*, which appears only here and in its parallel passage in Luke 13:24. The metaphor of two paths seems to have been fairly common in Jewish thought at the time, appearing in in the Talmud (*b. Berakot.* 28b), STJ literature (4 Ezra 7:6–16) and even Qumran (1QS 3:20–21). It is probably borrowed from Jeremiah 21:8, "Behold, I set before you the way of life and the way of death." Jesus's expansion to include gates, however, is quite interesting. There is a similar reference in the pseudepigraphic "Testament of Abraham." (recension A, 1.11; Box, 1927: 17) There is a clear eschatological emphasis in the text, with the path being one's life, and the gate being to either destruction or blessing (Hagner, 2000: 178–79). While the "wide gates" to Jerusalem were open to all trade, the narrow gates were those known only to the few. You had to know the winding paths to get to such gates, and then had to have access to them since they were controlled by guards or proprietors. If you were a persecuted minority, such as the Christians in the first century, you needed to avoid the main gates or you were almost certainly going to be caught.

- What makes the work of seeking the narrow gate worthwhile? How does being a Christian compare to the "easier" roads others pursue?

"False Prophets"
Matthew 7:15–23

Monday, May 13

The identification of false prophets in this section should resonate with us as we observe the landscape of "Christianity" as it appears in the popular conscience. Television evangelists, over-the-air experts, and internet know-it-alls abound today; and they offer Christians a wide array of false, often dangerous messages. We often seek to be charitable, arguing that while we might not agree with them, these people are still our "Christian brothers and sisters."

Are they though? A wolf is a wolf. Rotten fruit cannot be made whole. Jesus makes it plain that he rejects these false prophets and calls them "lawless" (*anomia*). Consider for a moment how this idea of a false prophet, a person who looks like one thing but acts like a nothing, contrasts with Jesus's continual calls for the unification

of heart and eye, belief and idea throughout the sermon. A false prophet is not just someone who is confused or working through things. It is someone who is inwardly opposed to the Kingdom and the King but attempts to *appear* in harmony for the express purpose of taking advantage of the believers.

- If you have ever dealt with someone who deceived you to gain your trust and take advantage of you, reflect on how this is in conflict with Jesus's teachings. Even if this person was a "spiritual" person on the outside, they were not acting in concert with the will of God.

- How do we heal after being taken in by false prophets? What do we do with the scars that accumulate from their attacks and the damage they do?

Tuesday, May 14

There are only three places in the gospels where thornbushes (*akantha*) appear. Jesus uses them as an illustration here (also Luke 6:44). They appear in the parable of the seed (Matt 13:1–21; Mark 4:1–20; Luke 8:1–15); and finally, three gospels mention the crown of thorns (Matt 27:29; Luke 8:14; John 19:2). The author of Hebrews also employs the term in what is probably a reiteration of one of Jesus's parables (Heb 6:8). Thorns and thistles look *nothing* like grape vines or fig trees. Jesus makes a very obvious contrast, just as he describes the impossibility of a wolf pretending to be a sheep. Jesus's point is that false teachers don't *look anything like* true prophets. They don't bear true fruit. They are very good at convincing people that their false gospel is the same thing as the truth, but if you pause and look, there are obvious clues that they are lying.

Who could possibly be confused about wolves pretending to be sheep, or go to a thornbush looking for grapes? Two types of people: those who don't know any better and those who are so desperate to know that they don't verify, don't question. Predatory false prophets love both kinds of people.

- What are some obvious "false prophets" that draw in new believers and seekers even today?

- Do you find that pointing out the obvious issues with false prophets is an effective way to get people out from under their teachings? Why do false prophets tend to have such a strong hold on their followers?

Wednesday, May 15

Not everyone who professes to be a Christian is a true Christian. This is a truth that is present throughout the New Testament. The apostle John in particular warns his readers, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us" (1 John 2:19). How do we know who is a true believer and who is not? We simply

cannot glimpse into people's souls to know whether their confession is sincere or not. It is only in apostasy that we can recognize the false believer. Notice that I used the word *apostasy*, and not just *error*. Christians can be in error. They can be mistaken. John's point is that false believers *leave the faith*. This is what apostasy is. The apostate does not just misunderstand or make a mistake. The apostate willfully abandons the clear teaching of Scripture on the things which are *evident* for another authority.

Even then, however, Jesus says that we may not realize who is apostate until they are judged before his throne. The apostate can exist within even the most theologically robust church because some are perfectly capable for not acknowledging their errant beliefs "for the sake of unity." Our responsibility is (1) not to listen to apostate, false prophets and (2) make sure we are abiding in the truth of the Scripture. The apostates will be sorted out when Jesus returns to judge, and he will have absolute understanding.

- What are some of the non-negotiables (or fundamentals) of the faith that you might use as a standard for judging whether someone is apostate?

- Who should be responsible for dealing with apostates? Is it something individual believers should make judgments on by themselves?

Thursday, May 16

There was no point wasting energy on trying to fix a diseased fruit tree. Once the disease (*sapros*) got into the tree, you couldn't get it out. Jesus appears to be borrowing from Isaiah again.

> *"Therefore, as the tongue of fire devours the stubble, and as dry grass sinks down in the flame, so their root will be as rottenness, and their blossom go up like dust, for they have rejected the law of YHWH of hosts, and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel"* (Isaiah 5:24).

The Hebrew word here is *māq* (or *māqaq*) which has a sense of wasting away, like a tree that dries up and crumbles to dust. (Notice the parallel in the Isaiah passage above.) It is clearly associated with disease and damage (Ps 38:6; Zech 14:12). Jesus does not have in mind a little bit of rotten fruit but of a persistent disease which must be rooted out before it infects the rest of the orchard. The contemporary usage of the word "toxic" applies here. The rot of a false prophet is potentially a toxin for all around them.

- Why do you think people tend to tolerate false prophets and toxic behavior? Is it *really* out of Christian love or is there something deeper?

- Describe a time when you experienced the painful removal of something that would only do harm? It could be a relationship or even a physical experience. What are the difficulties of such a removal? And what are the advantages?

Friday, May 17

One last thing is worth noting about false prophets. They tend to look to external acts as justification for their "salvation." In Jesus's telling of their appeal to enter the kingdom, he says they will protest that they prophesied and cast our demons in his name. They count on their "mighty works" as validation of their supposed faith. Jesus is returning to the themes he brought up in his *antitheses* in chapter 5. People are quick to define their faith by actions, by "following the rules," and by people noticing they are "being holy." While the outward actions of the righteous and the unrighteous might look similar, the real test is whether they are doing these things because they are God's will (the righteous) or their own will (the unrighteous).

As strange as it sounds, doing "the right thing" can be sin. We turn righteous actions into sin when we do them for our own, selfish reasons. A false prophet's actions and even words may seem completely reasonable, even commendable. This is something that was true in the ancient church and is still true today. This is why we should not base our assessment of ministries and churches solely on "results." The underlying belief system, the ideas and thinking which motivate actions are far more important than the observable, quantifiable results. As J. R. R. Tolkien once wrote, "All that is gold does not glitter."

- Do you have experience with what you might now recognize as false prophecy in the church? How did you recognize the danger?

- What steps have you taken (or want to take) in your life to look for the deeper motives of people? How can you avoid turning this into a sort of pessimism or judmentalism?

"House on the Rock"
Matthew 7:24–27

Monday, May 20

Jesus leans heavily upon the wise/fool paradigm from Proverbs, but he shifts the focus away from the simple actions of "the wise" to adherence to his words, or more accurately, teachings (*logoi*). Jesus refers to a specific kind of lived out, practical wisdom (Pennington, 2017: 233–34). It is virtuous and long-term wisdom, as opposed to the wisdom of the moment or a particular kind of skill. He employs the image of a house, but it seems as if he is not describing just any house but *the* house—the Temple. We are so used to referring to the House of YHWH in Jerusalem as "the temple" that there is no Hebrew word for temple. It is only "the House of YHWH" or "the complex" (Heb. *heykal*). Most of the places where the English translations read "temple," the text is really "house."

This changes how we read Jesus's words almost immediately. We are not just speaking about a habitation, which can be built or torn down as necessary. This is a monument to God—the eternal God. Its construction requires a great deal more of us. A simple house requires walls and a roof. A temple requires planning, resources. Herod spent decades rebuilding the Jerusalem temple, and it was completed decades after his death. Building the church requires wisdom and planning and investment. It cannot be done quickly or "easily." There are no tricks to good building.

- What are some hallmarks of spiritual wisdom when it comes to building things up? How do they aid in the growth of believers and the Church?

- Identify some "shortcuts" people often employ when trying to build the Church. What kinds of floods and winds might cause problems when we employ these tactics?

Tuesday, May 21

Modern construction can pour its own "rock" in the form of a concrete footer. The ancient world lacked this technology, or rather concrete was the reserve of the Roman elites. This does not mean, however, that ancient construction was necessarily more poor than modern construction. Building a quality home required digging foundation trenches, which would go through the soil and eventually get down to the limestone or basalt bedrock. The Galilean site of Khirbet Qana (possibly the "Cana" of John 2) has evidence of substantial excavations for construction (Fiensy, 2014; 189–90). These towns tended to be sited on hillsides near water sources like springs or streams. The Galilee Mountains would have had torrential flooding during the rainy seasons, with streams that are small or dry during most of the year suddenly swelling or cutting new courses. Construction would, by its nature, change the flow of water. These floods are no longer experienced today because of modern irrigation methods (Gaith, 1999: 52; Hershkovitz, 2018: 138). If a house was not constructed well, the rainy season would destroy it.

A well-built house could last pretty much forever. It is hardly a surprise that the village of Capernaum still has a solidly built house near the shore of the Sea of Galilee which is believed to have been Simon Peter's home. The foundations, which are basalt blocks, reach down to the very bedrock. Although the upper structure was destroyed centuries ago, the outline is still easily seen and the walls were reconstructed and are visible today.

- Have you "built" parts of your spiritual life on shoddy, quick foundations? What have the results of this been?

- How did you repair the situation to improve? Are there still issues due to these poor choices?

Wednesday, May 22

If we look into the idea of buildings and foundations in the Hebrew Scriptures, there are a number of passages that Jesus might have been exegeting and interpreting here. One that stands out, however, is Isaiah 28:15–18. As we have noted, Matthew's gospel relies heavily upon Isaiah. There, God pronounces judgment on those who "have made a covenant with death," a figure of speech for complete foolishness. It is equivalent to, "You'll kill yourself if you do that." In particular, comparing the refuge one has in God's house and that provided by folly, Isaiah notes, "Whoever believes will not be in haste" (Isa 28:16). This Hebrew phrase (*ham'amîn lo' yaḥîš*) is presented as if it is a token or slogan. One commentator reads it as "founded by the Master Builder who hurries not" (Irwin, 1977: 31–32; cf. Prov 8:29–30). Regardless of its exact meaning, this possibly something that was inscribed on the cornerstone of an important building, possibly even the Jerusalem temple (Childs, 2001: 209). It would have been visible to all who walked by, with the builder's testimony of strength reinforced by the endurance of the structure itself.

It may be that this passage in Isaiah is a polemic against the rhetoric employed in Canaanite religion for constructing temples. Although they predate Isaiah by several centuries, there is a song that appears in the Ugaritic Baʿal Cycle (UBC) that says exactly the opposite.

> "Quickly, build the house,
> Quickly erect the palace.
> "Quickly shall you buil[d] the house,
> Quickly shall you erect the pal[ace],
> "Amid the summit of Sapan." (*CAT* 1.4 V.52–55)

The haste of the construction is necessary in the UBC because Baʿal has won a victory over other, older gods and wishes to assert his superiority by being worshiped. The urgency is such that he does not even allow the builders to include a window. The one God has no need for haste. There is no one who will take his power from him, so we do not build in haste. We build with wisdom.

- How is building your spiritual life like building a temple to God?

- Take a few minutes to consider 1 Corinthians 3:10–23 and its meaning in relationship to this discussion.

Thursday, May 23

Jack Kingsbury once described the failure of STJ leaders to accept Jesus this way: "owing to the leaders' abject repudiation of Jesus, they unwittingly effect, not the salvation of Israel as they had anticipated, but just the opposite, Israel's demise as God's special people" (Kingsbury, 1988: 124). While Kingsbury advocated a theological perspective that rejected Israel's role in the kingdom (something I disagree with him about), he is spot-on in the effect of the Jewish leaders' rejection of Jesus. One could almost forgive the hardness of their

hearts to Jesus while he was ministering, but after the resurrection, their rejection became willful and adamant. To put it another way, Jesus did not reject Second Temple Judaism. Second Temple Judaism rejected Jesus.

Jesus did not call his audience to build upon *a rock*, but upon *the rock*. Paul came to understand Jesus as the rock which provided living water to Israel (1 Cor 10:4). "Jesus not only affords a concluding parallel between himself and Moses, but also between his words and the source of salvation in the Temple" (Welch, 2009: 180). Looking back at Jesus's words, we can see that he is making it clear that he was the Lawgiver, the Temple Maker. The foundation upon which the Temple was built was the presence of God among His people. Jesus now incarnated that presence, and the Temple authorities rejected Him. They rejected their foundation (21:42; cf. Ps 118:22; Acts 4:11; 1 Pet 2:4). The Church that is founded upon Christ will withstand the storms. The church founded on the same faulty foundations as had been used for STJ is bound to fall.

- Consider Romans 11:11–24 in light of this understanding of the relationship of the Church to Second Temple Judaism.

- Discuss the Romans passage in depth with someone, considering what it means for the Gentiles to be "grafted in" and Paul's warning about the results of unbelief.

Friday, May 24

Generally, Jewish sermons were supposed to end with a note of comfort (*Sif. Deut.* 342). Jesus does not. Jesus ends instead with an admonition that failure to follow his word will result in a great collapse (7:27). This is the only place where this Greek word (*ptosis*) appears. It is tied to the idea of a collapse to the ground or a death. Could he have in mind the fall of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70? Perhaps. There is no reason to think that the early church would have not seen this as connecting to the temple.

The destruction of the Jerusalem temple did shake Judaism to its core. The priesthood and the Sadducees lost any power and influence, virtually disappearing from the historical record, though they likely did persist in some new form (Goodman, 2006: 153–62). The Pharisees were scattered but eventually met at Yavneh where they developed what became rabbinical Judaism (Cohen, 1984: 44–70). Christians, however, had fled Jerusalem and were already developing a new identity which fused Jews and Gentiles based on their common faith in Christ. Jesus's admonition was taken to heart, and the Christians relied upon this building metaphor for the Church (1 Cor 3:9; Heb 3:3; 1 Pet 2:5).

- How is the motivation of a "negative" ending different from a more positive or comforting ending? What value is there in the dissonance of a warning as conclusion?

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