

21-DAY DEVOTIONAL

DARE TO GO HIGHER

2026

PRAYER & FAST GUIDE

PRAY FIRST

Prayer is the foundation of who we are at Cypress Creek Church. We believe prayer shapes our future, so in every situation—good or bad—we choose to PRAY FIRST. Instead of acting first and asking God to fix it later, we make prayer our first response, not our last resort.

This year our heart is always to Pray First, but we are daring you to go higher in every area of your life, especially your prayer life. We believe God is inviting us not to settle for surface-level prayers, but to lean in deeper, trust Him more fully, and seek Him more intentionally than ever before.

As you discover the beauty of daily conversation with your Creator, you'll experience His presence in ways that can truly change your life. When you learn how to pray, prayer becomes a natural part of everyday life—and you begin to experience what it really means to PRAY FIRST.

Before you start your day,
Before you go to bed,
Before work or school,
Before you send a text,
Before you post on social media,
Before that big meeting,
Before you eat or travel.
Keep God **FIRST** in Everything!

We are excited to join you during the 21-day church-wide prayer and fast! This booklet is designed to guide you through prayer, fasting, and a devotional journey. It's meant to bring joy and clarity to your time with God and help you grow as you dare to go higher in your conversations with Him.

Pastor David and Natalie Bamberry
Cypress Creek Church

Jesus said, "Seek First his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Matthew 6:33

THE PLAN FOR PRAYER

“Lord, teach us to pray.” Luke 11:1

Prayer is most effective when it isn't something we do every now and then, but when it's a lifestyle we cultivate. If you want **to prioritize prayer, you need a plan**. To help you get started, it's important to...

Have a Certain Time

Jesus got up early in the morning to spend time with His Heavenly Father. Make a daily appointment with God – whether it's first thing in the morning, at lunch, or in the evening – and faithfully keep it. Start with 15 minutes a day and then you will notice it slowly increasing to 30 minutes or more.

Have a Certain Place

Jesus had a specific place He went to pray. Having a designated place to pray helps us remove distractions and frees us to worship and pray out loud. Jesus always made sure He would withdraw from everyone.

Have a Certain Plan

As we pray every day, our plans for our prayer time can vary, maybe including worship music, Bible reading, quiet time to listen to God and writing down prayers to God. It does not have to look the same; it just helps when we have a plan for connecting regularly with God.

To help guide you, we invite you to join us in the 21-day Bible reading and devotional found in this book.

Knowing God should be our priority—not just learning about Him or even serving others in His Name, but spending time with Him, praising and worshiping, talking and listening. The more we get to know Him, the more we want to know.

THE POWER OF PRAYER

The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results. James 5:16

Talking to God Through Prayer

Prayer is simply an outpouring of your heart to God and then making room in your life to hear back from Him in His Word and as He gets involved in your circumstances. **God wants to have a conversation with you.** He longs to hear what is really on your heart. He wants openness and honesty. He wants you to be Real.

Why Prayer Works

Prayer has been more effective in our lives than human solutions. Time, and time and time again, we have seen that lasting change comes only through prayer. When we pray – release it into His hands – God accomplishes what I cannot do in my own strength. (James 5:16)

Praying God's Word

God's Word is one of the most powerful tools we have for building a daily prayer life. It brings truth, encouragement, and direction to our prayers.

Throughout the Bible, God gives us promises we can pray. When you pray Scripture, you're praying in alignment with God's Word—and it becomes deeply personal as God highlights verses that speak to your current season. See the example of how to pray God's Word.

Example:

2 Timothy 1:7 says, "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, love, and a sound mind."

You can pray it like this:

"Father God, I thank you I don't have a spirit of fear, but one of power, love, and a sound mind. When I feel overwhelmed or afraid, I trust You will give me peace, strength and clarity. Thank you, God, for your love."

Praying with Confidence and Faith

- The moment you pray, God hears your prayers. (1 Peter 3:12)
- God immediately goes to work on your behalf when you pray according to His will. (1 John 5:14)
- God wants to fight your battles for you. (Exodus 14:14)
- It is easy to know God's will when you pray the Word of God in your prayers. (Colossians 1:1-14)
- You can multiply your prayer power by getting someone to agree with you in prayer. (Matthew 18:19)
- Learning the power of perseverance will keep your prayers active until you see the manifestation. (Luke 18:1)

THE REASON TO PRAY

Come close to God, and God will come close to you. James 4:8

Why Should I Pray?

Prayer connects you to God.

Prayer isn't about performance. It's about relationship. Prayer keeps you close to God's heart.

Prayer puts God first.

When you pray, you're saying, *"God, I trust You more than myself."* Prayer aligns your priorities with His.

Prayer brings clarity and direction.

God uses prayer to guide your decisions and give wisdom for your life.

Prayer changes you as it changes your situation.

Prayer doesn't always change circumstances right away, but it always begins with your heart.

Prayer releases God's power.

God moves when His people pray. Prayer invites heaven into earth situations.

Prayer builds faith.

The more you pray and see God respond, the more your faith grows.

Prayer brings peace.

Prayer shifts worry into trust and replaces anxiety with God's peace.

Prayer helps you hear God's voice.

When you slow down and pray, you become more aware of what God is saying.

Prayer aligns you with God's will.

Prayer isn't about convincing God—it's about aligning yourself with what He already wants to do.

The most powerful force on earth is no nuclear, atomic, military-based, or government-led. The most powerful force on earth is God's power in answer to the prayers of His People.

PRAYING DAILY

Pray continually. I Thessalonians 5:17

It's important to write down what you're praying for and trusting God to do. Keeping a journal helps you stay consistent in prayer and reminds you how God answers. When you see a prayer answered, mark it down and take time to thank God.

I pray for salvation and blessings for these friends and family members...

I am praying and trusting God this year for...

“I tell you, you can pray for anything, and if you believe that you’ve received it, it will be yours.” Mark 11:24

I pray for our Government. (I Timothy 2:1-4 tells us to pray for those in authority.)

President _____

National Leaders _____

State Leaders _____

City Leaders _____

Examples of what to Pray for:

- Family members or friends to know God
- Direction for your life
- Protection
- Finances
- Forgiveness
- Healing for your Body, your soul and your mind
- Your job
- Your school
- To have peace in your life and not worry

***“Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for.
Keep on seeking, and you will find.
Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you.”
Matthew 7:7***

THE REASON TO FAST

So we fasted and earnestly prayed that our God would take care of us, and he heard our prayer. Ezra 8:23

I am ready for More

Fasting is a fundamental spiritual discipline for anyone—seeking more of God. Fasting takes our faith to another level and increases the effectiveness of our prayers. **It is a vital part of prayer.**

Fasting is about Less of Us and More of God

The purpose of fasting is to take our focus off our earthly concerns and listen to what God has for us. The Bible tells us to “Seek First his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Matthew 6:33

Fasting is Biblical

Prayer and fasting are practiced regularly through the Bible. We see God’s people in both the Old Testament and New Testament pray and fast to seek God’s face and what He is calling them to. Read more about this in Nehemiah 9, Esther 4, Matthew 4 and Matthew 6.

Why Should I Fast?

There are just as many reasons to fast as there are reasons to pray. If you are uncertain about what you hope to gain from fasting, reflect on these questions:

- Are you in need of healing or a miracle?
- Do you need a fresh encounter with God in your Life?
- Is there a dream inside you that only He can make possible?
- Do you desire a deeper, more intimate and powerful relationship with the Lord?
- Are you ready to have heightened sensitivity to the desires of God?
- Do you need to break away from bondages of sin that have been holding you hostage?
- Do have a friend or loved one who needs salvation?
- Do you desire to know God’s will for your life?

Consider your Motive for Fasting

We are told in the Bible, “You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures”. James 4:2-3

Make sure your intentions for fasting are pure: You want to get close to God. You want His voice to be louder than the world’s or even your own voice in your life.

FASTING

Types of Fast

We have several ways to practice God's command for us to fast. Pray about which one God is challenging you to do.

- **Water and Liquids Only Fast**—While on this fast, you refrain from eating any food.
- **Selective Fast**—Abstaining from certain types of foods (meats, sweets, bread). Daniel Fast is a good example in the Bible—Daniel 10:3. This fast is good for beginners, or those with health needs, or restrictive diets.
- **Partial Fast**—Skipping one of your meals.
- **Soul Fast**—Set aside things that are polluting your soul (social media, TV, movies, gaming or news). With our growing dependency on media, we often do not allow for a time of disconnection or silence.

Fasting Supercharges our Prayer Lives

By eliminating many if not most of the distractions we usually face, prayer connects us to God and fasting disconnects us from the world. Fasting allows us to quiet the appetites of our bodies and the desires of our souls so our spirits can grow stronger and closer to God.

Establishing a routine of daily prayer with plenty of time to seek and hear from God is utterly essential during your fast. You may want to follow a book. Keep a fasting journal. We also recommend setting aside times to join with other people fasting for worship, prayer and encouragement.

After Fasting...How can I be sure that the effects of my fast become permanent?

1. Respond in worship to all the blessings you have received. You may want to voice the testimony of your fast in your small group, at our Sunday celebration, or on Facebook. Proclaim God's goodness!
2. Make a list of those blessings in a notebook or journal.
3. Persevere in the prayer routine that you have begun. Consider fasting once a month, once a week, or as the Lord leads you.
4. Finally, examine your life, seek counsel, and ask the Lord whether some of the foods or activities that you have gotten rid of during your fast should be put out of your life permanently!

***Fasting is a time for purifying yourself before God.
As you empty yourself of your sinful habits, indulgent appetites,
and pleasurable distractions, you discover more of God's
presence and make room for more of His goodness in your Life.***

READING THE BIBLE

Study this Book of Instruction continually. Meditate on it day and night so you will be sure to obey everything written in it. Only then will you prosper and succeed in all you do. Joshua 1:8

How to Read the Bible

Start with Prayer

Before you read, ask God to speak to you. *“God, help me understand Your Word and show me what You want to say to me today.”*

Read a chapter or two at a time

One chapter is enough. Consistency matters more than quantity.

Read Slowly and Carefully

Take your time. If something stands out, pause and think about it. God often speaks through one verse, not the whole chapter.

Ask Simple Questions

- What is God saying here?
- What does this tell me about God?
- How does this apply to my life today?

Make It Personal

Turn what you read into a prayer. Ask God to help you live out what He showed you.

Write It Down

Write one thought in a prayer journal, verse, or takeaway. This helps you remember what God spoke to you.

Obey What You Read

The goal isn't just information—it's transformation. Ask yourself: What is one step I can take today?

If you're new to the Bible, start with:

- Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John (the life of Jesus)
- Proverbs (wisdom for daily life)
- Psalms (prayers and encouragement)

Remember, the goal isn't just to read the Bible, but to let God's Word shape your life. Be consistent, give yourself grace, and trust that God will meet you each time you open His Word.

Let's read God's Word together through the 21-day Sermon on the Mount devotional found on the next page.

DAY 1

Learning from Jesus in Matthew

Scripture

Read Matthew 5:1-5 (Internal Righteousness)

Observation

In this three week guide, we will be “SOAP”ing (Scripture—Observation—Application—Prayer) through Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount which begins with the eight Beatitudes. The first three beatitudes deal with our inner lives.

5:3—The word for “**spirit**” can refer to an **impersonal wind** (“breeze” or “cool” in Genesis 3:8) or our **personal life energy** (“my spirit is in anguish” Job 7:11), that is, our inner being. Due to the Roman oppression and the poverty of most of the Jews, they felt powerless in Jesus’ time (“poor in spirit”) with no hope, no resources, and no influence. This meant they felt totally helpless, unable to do anything about their circumstances. This is what it means to be “poor in spirit.”

5:4—Those who “**mourn**” usually do so due to a loss of some sort, usually the death of a friend or loved one. “Jacob **mourned** for his son.” (Genesis 37:34).

5:5—Moses was a very **meek**, humble, gentle man, but this should not be equated with weak or unimportant, which we often do. Job 24:4 - “...the **poor** of the land are forced into hiding.” Psalms 76:9 - “God rose up...to save all the **lowly** (humble) of the earth.”

Application

What is Jesus saying here? Why is it so great to be powerless, mourning, and lowly? Is that what it means to be blessed? No, it doesn’t. The Hebrew word for “blessed” used in the Beatitudes is translated as “happy” in Psalm 1:1 - “**Happy** is the man...who delights in God’s word...like a tree planted by streams of water...he prospers.” Psalm 2:12b - “...those who take refuge in Him are **happy**.” **Those whom God provides for and protects are happy.**

The first line of each beatitude is an outsider’s observation. In 1 Kings 10:8, the queen of Sheba observed that Solomon’s servants were happy, and Jesus is doing the same thing here. He observed that even though the Jews were suffering outwardly, inwardly they were “happy.” Why?

“...because the kingdom of heaven **is** theirs” (5:3b). Even though they were oppressed in the earthly realm, God had already blessed them in the spiritual realm.

“...because they will be comforted” (5:4b). Even though they were downtrodden and grieving at that time, they would be comforted spiritually.

“...because they will inherit the earth” (5:5b). The measure of wealth back then was to own land. Even though they were poor outwardly, they were comforted inwardly because they were destined to inherit the land (Psalm 37:9-11).

When things aren’t going well for us, what should we think? That God has abandoned us? That He doesn’t care for us? No! We all suffer in this fallen world, but in those times, we need to remember that “the kingdom of heaven **is** ours”, and that He will never leave us or forsake us. We are blessed.

Prayer

“Lord Jesus, thank you for the perspective that I now have. I know You died on the cross and rose again for me, and so I know I currently have all of these things—eternal life, the comfort of Your presence in my life, and the future promise that I will rule the earth with You. Help me to live now with that in mind. Amen.”

DAY 2

Learning from Jesus in Matthew

Scripture

Read Matthew 5:6-8 (External Righteousness)

Observation

The first 3 beatitudes dealt with our inner, personal righteousness. Today's 3 beatitudes deal with our external relationships with others.

5:6—Righteousness is sometimes thought of as having to do with our relationship with God (being “right” with God), whereas justice has to do with our relationship with others (treating others justly). The truth is, however, that these are connected. We can't be right with God unless we treat others right. As members of God's kingdom, we can't be totally satisfied (“filled”) unless we see that justice is being done to others.

5:7—In the parable of the unforgiving slave, we learn that mercy is related to forgiving someone we know (Matthew 18: 32-35), but Jesus also shows mercy to people He doesn't know (Matthew 9:27; 15:22; 17:15). “Mercy” connotes the idea of loyal love, compassion, grace, and faithfulness in a relationship. It is an important word. Merciful action (generous acts of love) is the concrete expression of our loyalty to God.

5:8—“...the pure in heart...will see God”, but isn't it a dangerous thing to look upon God's face? That's what God said to Moses (Exodus 33:20). Yes, Adam and Eve saw God face to face, and even though we will “see His face” in the future (Revelation 22:4), we're in an in between time now. In a spiritual sense, we can “approach His throne” (Hebrew 4:16), and “We're seated with Him...” (Ephesians 2:6), but not physically.

Application

We've learned today that we're to treat others justly, doing generous acts of love, but being “pure in heart” goes beyond that. It means that our external behavior is matched perfectly with our internal life and motivations with no hypocrisy. Can we do that consistently? No.

After his sin with Bathsheba, David asked for God to “...create a clean (pure) heart for me, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” - Psalm 51:10. If the Bible tells us to do something “above all else”, we should pay close attention to what it's talking about. Proverbs 4:23 - “Guard your heart above all else.”

Our goal is to be “perfect as He is perfect” (Matthew 5:48), “holy as He is holy” (1 Peter 1:16), and “pure as He is pure” (1 John 3:3). Remember that He is “...watching us, examining everyone...the Lord is righteous, He loves righteous deeds, and the upright (righteous) will see His face.” (Psalm 11:4-7)

Prayer

“Lord, even though I usually have good intentions, my daily actions fall far short of perfection. My goal is to “ascend Your holy mountain” that I might “see Your face” (Psalm 24:3-6), but only the one with “clean hands and a pure heart” can do that. Thank you for the perfect life that You lived, and that by believing in You, You have attributed Your righteousness to me, even though I don't deserve it. Help me to grow more like You each day. Amen.”

DAY 3

Learning from Jesus in Matthew

Scripture

Read Matthew 5:9-12 (Righteousness in Adversity)

Observation

As followers of Jesus living in a fallen world, peacemakers should expect conflict. All people want peace, but they want it done in a way that benefits them. People will protect their own selfish interests, so **peacemakers** should expect to be **persecuted**.

5:9—Jesus lived in a tumultuous time. The Romans ruled over and taxed the Jews. The Sadducees were the elite, the top 1%, and they were in bed with the Romans so as to protect their interests. The Pharisees closely followed the law, but were legalistic (no grace), and they hated the Sadducees. The Essenes were Bible nerds who separated themselves from the others. The Zealots wanted to force change by rioting against the Romans. Jesus thrust Himself into the middle of all this, befriending any who were willing to follow Him. Peacemakers must be proactive. To bring peace means to be in the midst of conflict, not to avoid it. Peacemaking can't be done from afar.

5:10—This is the 8th and last beatitude. Notice that it completes (and is similar to) the 1st beatitude: the kingdom of heaven is for those who are poor in spirit (downtrodden) and persecuted.

5:11-12—The beatitudes were written in the 3rd person ("they/them"). Jesus was making general observations, but now He is speaking directly to them, comforting them: when **you** live by kingdom principles, "**you** will be insulted, persecuted, and lied about", but "Be glad and rejoice, for your reward is great in heaven."

Application

Job's friends said, "Do the right thing and you will be blessed (happy), but Jesus said, "when God's kingdom comes to earth, you'll be caught in the crossfire." "...I did not come to bring peace but a sword." (Matthew 10:34)

After crossing the Red Sea, the Israelites sang a song of exultation to the Lord (Exodus 15:1-18). They were thrilled that they had just been miraculously saved from the Egyptians, but then they turned around and faced a desert. The church at Smyrna was warned, "...you will have tribulation", but "Don't be afraid...be faithful...and I will give you the crown of life." (Revelation 2:9-10)

"Be glad and rejoice" appears only 2 times in the New Testament: Matthew 5:12 and Revelation 19:7-8. There is a tension in these latter verses. Saints are "given" (passive) fine linen to wear (the robes of a priest). Salvation is a free gift (a result of our faith in Jesus), but the bride is expected to "prepare herself" (active; "works").

The kingdom of heaven is ours, but we are to enter into the fray just like Jesus did. By faithfully following in Jesus' footsteps, we can rejoice even in the midst of persecution, for those who do so "will be called sons of God" (Matthew 5:9, Galatians 3:26).

Prayer

"Lord, to be honest, I don't like conflict and persecution. I'd prefer to stay "under the radar", living life as hassle free as possible, but then I realize that You didn't do that. You saw injustices and did something about them. Give me the courage to do the same. Amen."

DAY 4

Learning from Jesus in Matthew

Scripture

Read Matthew 5:13-16 (Salt and Light)

Observation

We are “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world”, so be salty and let your light shine.

5:13—“**Salt**” has many uses and meanings. It seasons, purifies, and preserves food. As a preservative, it helps things endure, and as such, it is a symbol of God’s long-enduring covenant. Numbers 18:19, “...a perpetual covenant of salt.” 2 Chronicles 13:5, “...the LORD God gave the kingship to David forever by a covenant of salt.”

Salt creates a thirst. We’re to create in people a thirst for God, thus preserving them for all eternity. If we aren’t doing that (if we’re not salty), even though we may be saved, we’re no good for the kingdom (1 Corinthians 3:10-15). Would any of us want to enter into eternity in that way (Romans 14:12)?

5:14-16—Matthew makes 2 positive statements about **light** (“You are the light of the world...” and “...let your light shine”) which then bracket a negative statement, “don’t put it under a basket.”

“Torah” and “light” sound very similar in Hebrew. Ancient Jews made a connection between these words, a thought that runs throughout Isaiah. “In the last days... instruction (“Torah”) will go out from Zion and Jerusalem... disputes will be settled... let us walk in the Lord’s light.” (Isaiah 2:2-5).

Application

Isaiah has 4 servant songs that introduce the Servant (Jesus - Isaiah 42:1-4) and His work (Isaiah 49:1-7). His obedience is a contrast to Israel’s sins (Isaiah 50:4-11). The 4th song tells of His suffering and triumph (Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12). No one in the Old Testament could fulfill this role as a faithful servant, not Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, or even David, so God “chose” to send His own Son (Isaiah 42:1, 6) to bring “justice” and “light” to the nations (Isaiah 49:6).

Jesus was crushed on the Cross (Isaiah 53:10), punished for our sins (Isaiah 53:6) that we might be justified (made right) before the Father (Isaiah 53:11). We are “a portion” (Isaiah 53:12) a people that were given to Him, but for what purpose? To be salt and a light to the nations.

There were Old Testament priests that were often unfaithful, but we are now “...the Lord’s priests... ministers of our God” (Isaiah 61:6 & 1 Peter 2:9) and “ministers of reconciliation... reconciling the world to Him” (2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

Jesus pairs “salt” with “light” in today’s verses. The Old Testament, an enduring “covenant of salt”, was fulfilled only by Jesus. He is the “light of the world” (John 8:12), a “light to the nations” (Isaiah 42:6 & 49:6), and we are now fulfilling that role if we “walk in the light” (1 John 1:7). We are the “salt of the earth... the light of the world”, sent to share the light of the gospel with others so that they would be saved (preserved.)

Prayer

“Lord, I understand we are Your plan A with no plan B. You have given us Your Spirit to guide us, but we still must choose to follow faithfully, to produce fruit for Your kingdom. Help me to remain “salty” and to “let my light shine” so that many will turn to You. Amen.”

DAY 5

Learning from Jesus in Matthew

Scripture

Read Matthew 5:17-20 (Fulfilling the Law and the Prophets)

Observation

We now enter into the main section of Jesus' sermon where He teaches us how righteousness is to be practiced.

5:17—Some of Jesus' listeners were a little nervous that He wasn't honoring the Law. He was healing (working) on the Sabbath, eating with sinners and tax collectors, etc, but He assures them that He came to "fulfill" it (complete it; flesh it out).

5:18—"I assure you..." "Assure" is also translated as "verily" or "truly." It means the same as "Amen", verifying that a truthful statement has been made. Heaven and earth will perish (wear out like clothing), but God and His word are eternal (Psalms 102:25-26).

5:19—There are 613 laws in the Old Testament, and all are to be obeyed, but are some "least" (not as important as others)?

Application

So, Jesus came to fulfill, not dismantle, the Law. In fact, it will outlast the sky and the land. All the commands in the Law are important, but the intent behind the Law is what's important, so that intent must be correctly understood.

5:20—The scribes and Pharisees thought they were strictly following the Law, but they were clueless. Over the next six days we will learn the intent behind the Law. They thought He was lax in following it, but He will show them that they were the ones who were lax.

How often do we look at people and judge them because we think their actions are wrong without understanding all that is going on in their lives or what their motivations are?

So what does Jesus require of us? What's the greatest commandment? That we love God and love others (Matthew 22:36-40). Jesus followed these verses with 8 "woes" (Matthew 23:13-36) which correspond to the 8 beatitudes. If we only strictly follow the letter of the Law, like the Pharisees, but do it without love, we will "never enter the kingdom of God."

Prayer

"Thank you, Father, for revealing Yourself to me through Your word, and for the commands contained in Your word. They are there for my own good, so convict me Holy Spirit when I stray from them, and draw me back to You. Your words are life to me, both now and forever. Amen."

DAY 6

Learning from Jesus in Matthew

Scripture

Read Matthew 5:21-26 (Murder begins in the Heart)

Observation

These 6 case studies begin with, "You have heard it said...but I tell you..." The 1st three cases deal with affairs of our own heart (internal), and the last three deal with others (external). Jesus gives examples of the wisdom approach to the Law, describing a way of life that is more expansive than just the words of the command.

5:21-22—"Don't murder...but I tell you...", something deeper is going on here. These sins or actions move from what seems to be the worst to the least injurious. **Murder** is obviously wrong. **Anger** (furious rage) isn't murder, but it can lead to it (Genesis 4:6-8). To call someone a **fool** shows contempt for them, and it is an attempt to shame them publicly. **"Moron"** is an off-handed slight.

But the consequences move from least to most. To be angry with someone could make you subject to judgment in a local court. Calling someone a fool, however, could land you in front of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish Supreme Court). And calling someone a moron will subject you to hellfire.

Application

Jesus is scrambling our values. He is saying that something as simple as calling someone created in God's own image a "moron" lights a fire within us. It is an indication of a heart attitude that can lead to something far worse.

5:23-26—If you're in your car on your way to church, but know you've done something against someone else, do not continue on your way to church! "First, go and be reconciled with your brother..." (Leviticus 6:1-7). "Reach a settlement quickly with your adversary..." or it could lead to something far worse.

Prayer

"Lord, it is so easy to be self-centered, to think of what I want, even if it means hurting others. It is so easy to judge others without knowing what is happening in their lives. Help me to love others, and put their interests ahead of my own. And if I do have an altercation with someone else, give me the wisdom to know how to settle it quickly. Amen."

DAY 7

Learning from Jesus in Matthew

Scripture

Read Matthew 5:27-30 (Adultery in the Heart)

Observation

Detectives tell us that sex, money, and power are the 3 motives behind almost every crime. As followers of Jesus, we have entered into a covenant with Him that requires faithfulness on our part. Marriage is an earthly reminder of what a covenant relationship is all about. From page 2 in the Bible (Genesis 2:24) and on, we see that sex is to be reserved for a man and a woman who have committed themselves to one another only.

5:27-28—Just like murder, we see that there is an action that is wrong (adultery), but there is something that brings us to that point (what is going on in our heart) that precedes the adulterous act.

“...look” is a present active participle which means “to go on looking.” A prolonged stare cultivates the act (causes it to grow), thus objectifying the woman (thinking of her only as a commodity, an object that is to be used and thrown away).

5:29-30—In a hyperbolic (exaggerated) statement, Jesus focuses on two things that seem indispensable to us: our eyesight and our hands. Whatever you have to sacrifice (within reason) in order to deal with the problem will be worth it.

Application

Cultivating an act will cause it to spill out at some point. Just like anger can lead to murder, so can lust lead to adultery. Our personal thoughts and character may be personal, but they are never private. They affect others.

God is the author of beauty, whether a beautiful world or a beautiful woman. To “look” at a woman and appreciate her beauty is not wrong, but to “go on looking” can easily lead to lust. Pornography, whether in a magazine or online, is wrong.

Isn't a “2nd prolonged look” setting the bar rather high? Yes, but that's why Jesus is discussing this. He was human just like we are, and understands the temptation. So what is the answer? Join men only clubs? Join a monastery? No, but we need to understand the seriousness of this issue, especially in our culture that has such an ungodly and casual view of sex.

Do we eliminate the problem by dressing women in burqas? No, but women need to understand their part in this when they dress provocatively. They need to better understand the effect this has on men.

Prayer

“Lord, You are holy, and You have called me to be holy as well (1 Peter 1:15-16). Help me to look beyond the temporary pleasures of misusing the gift of sex, help me to see all the damage it can do, and help me to understand, like Moses (Hebrews 11:26), that the rewards of heaven will far exceed any temporary pleasures here on earth. Amen.”

DAY 8

Learning from Jesus in Matthew

Scripture

Read Matthew 5:31-32; Matthew 19:3-9; Deuteronomy 24:1 (The Question of Divorce)

Observation

Today we look at two short verses, but what a complicated, heart-breaking subject. There was a heated debate going on in the 1st century among rabbis as to how Deuteronomy 24:1 should be interpreted. The Pharisees weren't so concerned about Jesus' views on divorce as they were interested in "testing" Him (Matthew 19:3) so as to discredit His reputation and divide His followers, thus weakening His influence.

Rabbi Shammai believed that "something improper" (Deuteronomy 24:1) referred to adultery. Rabbi Hillel believed it referred to anything the man might find with his wife that was "displeasing" to him (i.e., burning supper).

Application

Jesus shifts the discussion from Deuteronomy to Genesis 1:27-28 and 2:24.

"Man" (Genesis 1:27) is the word referring to "all mankind." They were "1" (even though they had to be male and female so as to multiply). In Genesis 2:22, however, the "1" was made into "2", only to become "1" again (Genesis 2:24, Matthew 19:5).

God desires loyalty to the covenant over disloyalty. He wants to be "1" with us which is pictured in marriage. Divorce ends that "oneness." Yes, Moses "permitted" divorce as a concession due to the "hardness of their hearts", but it wasn't that way from the beginning (Matthew 19:8).

As a nation, we agree with Rabbi Hillel. Every state has divorce on demand (for any reason). This view was devastating for women in Jesus' culture. Women were treated as property, and to not be married almost always resulted in poverty for them (John 4:16-18). That's why Paul wanted to ensure that women were supported (1 Timothy 5).

Jesus cares for the underdog, whether discarded women or children which he addresses next (Matthew 19:13-15). God has lavished forgiveness upon us just like the slave's master (Matthew 18:27). Our response should be to live in loyalty to His commands and our covenant with Him.

Just a quick comment (for those who are interested) on a complicated subject. Is a woman (or man) **actively** committing adultery if they remarry ("...causes her to **commit adultery**..." Matthew 5:32)? "Commit" is used in most translations, but the NIV has "**victim of adultery**" because "victim" is in the passive voice, not the active voice. One who remarries (depending on the circumstances) is not actively or willfully committing adultery, but is forced into being a "victim" because their spouse left them.

Prayer

"Lord, we all want to be loyal to our covenant with you, but we live in a fallen world, and relationships can get very messy. Help me Lord to remember to remain faithful, not only to You, but also to my spouse and family; to remain as one. Amen."

DAY 9

Learning from Jesus in Matthew

Scripture

Read Matthew 5:33-37 (Don't Break a Promise)

Observation

These next 3 days we'll be dealing with our relationships with others: how to act right with people.

5:33—"You have heard it said..." This Old Testament quote comes from 3 different sources. Leviticus 19:12 - "Do not swear falsely by my name, profaning it." Numbers 30:2 - "When a man makes a vow...he must not break his word..." Deuteronomy 23:21 - "If you make a vow to God, do not delay fulfilling it."

5:34-36—This 4th case study correlates with the 4th "woe" in Matthew 23:16-22. In Jesus' day, they didn't say the name of Yahweh so they wouldn't swear by His name and neither should we ("I swear by God...") Instead, they swore by things that were closely associated with Yahweh.

To swear by the sanctuary or the altar or the sky (Matthew 23:16, 18, 22) was like crossing your fingers behind your back - I didn't swear by the "gold" in the sanctuary or by the "gift" on the altar or by "God's name!" This is deception, equivocation! It is creating a loophole so we won't be held to that which we've promised.

Swearing by anything that belongs to God or is under His control is like swearing to God Himself. Jesus takes this prohibition even farther by saying that we shouldn't even swear by the hair on our own heads because they are also under God's control.

Application

Why did Jesus say we should not "take an oath" or "swear" (to "affirm" has subtle differences)? Because it implies that we're only telling the truth when we "swear to", but not necessarily at other times.

5:37a— Literally in the Greek, this says "Let your word be yes, yes, or no, no" emphasizing that every word out of our mouths should be the truth, all the time.

5:37b—"Anything more than this is from the evil one." When we use oaths to deceive or when we make unwise oaths, we become serpents to one another.

Genesis 3:1—The serpent deceived Eve, "Did God say you can't eat from any tree in the garden?" No, he didn't. They were free to eat from any tree except one.

Today, "spin" or "gaslighting" is when we manipulate words in order to deceive others or to get what we want. God wants us to be honest and transparent when we are dealing with others.

Prayer

"Lord, it is so easy for me to misuse my tongue, to say things that I shouldn't, things that hurt others. It is wrong to even think those things, but to say them is worse because words can't be taken back. Help me to listen carefully, and when I speak, to choose words that will bless, not hurt others. Amen."

DAY 10

Learning from Jesus in Matthew

Scripture

Read Matthew 5:38-42 (The Law of Retaliation)

Observation

Jesus takes "...An eye for an eye..." from three (3) Old Testament books: Exodus 21:23-24, Leviticus 24:20, and Deuteronomy 19:21, which all vary a little in how they read. This is all about avoiding escalation, plus putting a limit on compensation which was usually monetary. If your eye is gone, what good does it do to take the eye of another? Wouldn't money be better?

5:39—Was Jesus a pacifist? Is He recommending a weak, passive response? Not at all! Go through the motion of slapping someone's right cheek with your right hand. How would you do it? A back-handed slap, which in their culture was done by one person to another of a lower social status or class. Jesus didn't "respond in kind", but turned His left cheek to them, requiring them to slap Him with the palm of their right hand. This is how equals would slap each other. Jesus was taking a stand, restoring His dignity as a human, "I am created in God's image just as you are; we're equal!"

5:40— One's "tunic" (shirt) was next to their skin. Their outer garment or coat was thicker and more expensive. They wore no underwear. Someone could take the coat of another as collateral, but it had to be returned by sunset (Exodus 22:26). There was no such law regarding their shirt, but to take their shirt meant to shame them publicly (they would have to take off their coat to give them their shirt, leaving them naked).

Jesus is exposing injustice, "You obviously need my stuff more than I do. Here, take my shirt and my coat." Taking just the shirt doesn't reveal how unjust they are (one still has his coat). Their actions are legal according to the law (like "an eye for an eye"), but Jesus wants to expose the injustice.

5:41— Legally, they could only "force you to go" one (1) mile. The Romans knew this was subject to abuse, so they put limits to it. It's humiliating to be forced to carry the pack of another person, but it could be used in a positive way. Like giving of the cloak, you could offer to go another mile, which can re-define the relationship.

Application

These case studies are followed logically by the next, "love your enemy." We're not to just stand up to others, but to love them. Jesus is scrambling a society that doesn't acknowledge a system of valuing others by promoting honor and justice, We need to do the same.

5:42—How will we respond to others who mistreat us? How can we effect real change? We don't have to put up with it (be their punching bag), but also, we're not to respond in kind.

A non-violent response forcing them to re-evaluate the relationship (verse 39), showing them extreme generosity (verse 40), and making time to establish a relationship with them (verse 41) can affect real change.

Prayer

"Jesus, when we are wronged or treated unfairly, help us respond with grace instead of retaliation. Guard our hearts from anger and pride, and teach us to trust You as our defender. Give us the strength to love generously, forgive freely, and reflect Your mercy in every situation. Amen."

DAY 11

Learning from Jesus in Matthew

Scripture

Read Matthew 5:43-48 (Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect)

Observation

Does the law really say, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy”? No! The Law never says, “Hate your enemy.” The Law clearly commands, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). There is no command in Scripture that tells God’s people to hate their enemies.

5:44-45—Pharisees taught that they should love those near and dear to them, but hate their enemies. Jesus taught otherwise. To be included in God’s family, we are to love and pray for everyone, even those who persecute us. Why? Because the Father loves all those created in His image. That is why He gives the sun and rain to everyone.

5:46-47—He will not reward you for doing what everyone else does, greeting and loving only those who are in your own circle of friends.

5:48—**“Be perfect, therefore, like your heavenly Father is perfect.”**

Application

To be “perfect” (“teleios” in Greek) is to be complete, whole, “pure in heart” (Matthew 5:8). This sets the bar as high as it can possibly be set; it means to be just like God. “teleios” is a wider term than moral flawlessness, just following the letter of the Law.

The rich young ruler asked what he must “do” in order to inherit eternal life (Matthew 19:16-22). Jesus responds that he must do more than just follow the commandments. He must be “perfect” (“teleios”) - sell all you have and follow Me. Those who are perfect (“pure in heart”) in both their actions and their motivations will see God’s face (Revelation 22:4), but that is not attainable in this life.

It is, however, something we should strive for. We are now in the process of being trained that we might grow into “a mature (teleios) man” (Ephesians 4:11-13). Paul’s goal was that he might teach everyone, presenting them “mature (teleios) in Christ” (Colossians 1:28).

We may not reach perfection in this life, but we are called to strive toward it, and we do that as we love others. **Love isn’t a feeling.** It doesn’t mean we have an emotional attachment to everyone. **Love is an attitude that results in action.** As we love and serve others, we are working towards perfection.

Prayer

“Lord, I’m too selfish to sell all I have, so I may not be perfect, but help me to work towards that goal. Help me to see You in everyone I meet, and do what I can to love them and meet their needs. Amen.”

DAY 12

Learning from Jesus in Matthew

Scripture

Read Matthew 6:1-4 (How to Give)

Observation

We've discussed six (6) case studies about how Jesus taught the Law should be properly applied. Now Jesus addresses three (3) common religious practices, and how to do them without being hypocritical: Giving (Matthew 6:2), Praying (Matthew 6:5), and Fasting (Matthew 6:16).

6:1-2—We must watch our motives carefully. It's good to "bring a casserole" to someone, but not if we do it just to be seen by others.

Notice "when", not "if"—"when you give", "when you pray", "when you fast." We will honor the Lord and be rewarded when, without fanfare, we show kindness to the poor (Proverbs 14:31; 19:17). Why help the poor? Because we're all created in His image (Proverbs 22:2).

6:3-4—Luke 7:1-10 tells of a centurion whose slave was very sick. He sent Jewish elders to Jesus, asking Him to heal his slave. The centurion had built the synagogue for them, but he didn't brag about it. The leaders themselves told Jesus what he had done. In fact, he didn't even think he was worthy to have Jesus in his home. When we give in secret like this, we will be rewarded.

Application

Jesus' definition of hypocrisy is different from ours. We say it's hypocritical to tell someone not to speed, but then to speed ourselves. Jesus' definition: doing the right thing, but for the wrong reasons.

Remember what Jesus said about the "pure in heart" (6th beatitude)—"they will see God", but that happens only when our external behavior is matched perfectly with our internal life and motivations. That is what it means to not be a hypocrite.

The words to one worship song ask this question, "Would I still be singing if no one could see me?"

Prayer

"Lord, Jesus, create a clean (pure) heart within me" (Psalm 51:10), a heart that looks only to pleasing You and not to be seen by others. Teach us to give, pray, and fast in ways that honor You—not to be seen by others, but to please You alone. Help us live with quiet obedience, humble generosity, and sincere faith, trusting that You see what is done in secret and reward what is done with the right heart. Amen."

DAY 13

Learning from Jesus in Matthew

Scripture

Read Matthew 6:5-9a (How to Pray - Part 1)

Observation

During the time in which the Israelites were exiled from their homeland, King Darius appointed 120 leaders to help him administer his kingdom. Daniel was one of three put over them, and they were jealous. He was totally trustworthy and free of corruption, but his Achilles heal, in their minds, was that he quietly prayed alone 3 times a day (Daniel 6:1-10). This needs to be our Achilles heal as well.

6:5—The Jews developed a fixed hour of prayer (like the Muslims) after the exile. When the call to prayer came, they would be expected to stop and pray. Some religious leaders, however, would make sure they were in the synagogue or at the markets at these times so everyone could see them.

6:6—Instead, we should be like Daniel, shutting ourselves in our private room so we can be alone with God.

6:7-8—Jesus not only criticized Jewish leaders who prayed hypocritically, but also Gentiles who babbled on constantly to their gods, pestering them to give them what they wanted, like at the time of Elijah (1 Kings 18:26-29).

Application

Jews and Gentiles alike show us how not to pray, but we should look to Old Testament examples like Daniel (Daniel 9:3-19), Ezra (Ezra 9:6-15), David (Psalm 51), Solomon (1 Kings 8:22-53), and many others, as well as Jesus, to see how to pray properly.

6:9a—“Therefore, you should pray like this...” Jesus developed the habit of praying every day (Mark 1:35), as well as at critical times, like right before choosing His 12 apostles (Luke 6:12-13) and in Gethsemane (Luke 22:39-46). Jesus taught us how we should pray in His model prayer which we’ll start looking at tomorrow.

Prayer

“Lord, You have promised that You have opened up Your throne room to us that we might approach You boldly (Hebrews 4:16) in prayer. I know I “should pray”. Help me to be more faithful and diligent in prayer, believing that You will hear and answer those prayers. Amen.”

DAY 14

Learning from Jesus in Matthew

Scripture

Read Matthew 6:9b-10 (How to Pray - Part 2)

Observation

Jesus' model prayer begins with, "Therefore you should pray like this..." (Matthew 6:9a), and it ends with a conclusion, "For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory..." (Matthew 6:13b-15). In between, Jesus mentions 6 requests: 3 are oriented toward the Father and 3 are oriented toward us.

6:9b—"Our Father in heaven, may Your name be honored as holy." Jesus often referred to "My Father" (Matthew 15:13; 18:35), but now it is, "Our Father"—we're invited into this relationship! Genesis 1-11 was full of corruption and rebellion against God, so beginning in Genesis 12 God made a covenant with Abraham who would prove to be obedient (Genesis 12:1-3a). This covenant, however, extended beyond the Jews to include the Gentiles (Genesis 12:3b) so that God's name would be honored by everyone.

6:10a—"Your kingdom come..." Jesus began His ministry with the announcement, "... the kingdom is at hand ("has come" or "has come near")" meaning it was present right then and there, ready to be entered into (Matthew 4:17). A kingdom is that area over which the king has authority to rule.

6:10b—"Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." For a king to rule over his kingdom means that the king's desire will be done within his kingdom. God's kingdom includes all of creation: heaven and earth. Jesus is praying that the Father's will would be done within His entire kingdom, on both heaven and earth. Why? Because it was not being done throughout the earth.

Application

Satan is contesting God's rule on earth. There was a cosmic battle in heaven, and Satan was cast down to earth with some of the angels (Revelation 12:3-4, 9). The whole world now "lies in the power of the evil one (Satan)" (1 John 5:19), but "the ruler of this world will be cast out" (John 12:31).

That happens little by little as we **honor** His name. In the 10 commandments we are told, "Do not take up the name of Yahweh in vain" (Exodus 20:7). We often have the idea that "taking God's name in vain" refers to cursing, but it is much more than that.

To "take up" means to lift or carry. Jesus isn't praying that God's name would be holy: it already was holy. He's praying that it would be "honored" as holy. As we go about our day, we are to "carry" or "take" His name with us, telling others about Him.

The Jews didn't say the word "God" ("Yahweh"). Instead, they would say "the Name." "Name" was equated with "Yahweh." "My Name (God) will be there in the temple" (1 Kings 8:29). "The Lord will choose where His Name will dwell" (Deuteronomy 12:11).

We honor God (the Name), treating it as holy, as we carry it to others. God's kingdom expands little by little as more people repent and are saved. That is the way His will is carried out on earth.

Prayer

"Father, I confess that I don't always honor Your name the way I should. While I may not misuse it with my words, I don't always lift You up through my actions or my witness. Help me live in a way that reflects Your character and points others to You. Use my life to honor Your name and expand Your Kingdom wherever I go. Amen."

DAY 15

Learning from Jesus in Matthew

Scripture

Read Matthew 6:11-15 (How to Pray - Part 3)

Observation

Jesus begins His prayer with an eye on the Father: that His name would be honored, His kingdom come, and His will be done. Then Jesus prays for us.

6:11—"Give us today the bread we need for today." God expects us to use godly wisdom and plan ahead like the ants (Proverbs 6:6-8), but not to the extent that we don't rely on Him (Luke 12:16-21). God gave them daily just enough manna for that day (Exodus 16:4).

6:12, 14-15—Forgiveness is so important that Jesus makes an additional comment about it after His prayer. In the Old Testament, to "forgive" often meant to release from a debt. In the New Testament, Jesus teaches that people need to be released (Luke 4:18, Luke 13:11-12).

6:13—It can be confusing to distinguish between a temptation, a trial, and a test. The Greek word Jesus uses here for "temptation" is the same word James uses 4 times in James 1:13. The "evil one" tempts us in a bad way, but God "tempts" ("tests") us in a good way. God always tests us with acts of obedience. He puts us in situations where we can be "tested" which brings us joy as we pass the test (James 1:2-3).

Jesus is praying here that we not be brought into the kind of temptation or test that we're not ready to handle.

Application

Practically, how do we forgive another person? Forgiving is not forgetting what someone did to us, condoning it, or expecting that you will be totally reconciled (which would be ideal). Forgiveness is a choice. We are to absolutely and firmly forgive another and then drop the matter. This releases the forgiver and the forgiven.

God chose to forgive us and we need to do the same, but if I can't bring myself to forgive the horrible thing someone did to me, am I then not saved? (Matthew 6:15). No, personal fellowship with God is in view in this verse, not salvation from sin. One cannot walk in fellowship with God if he refuses to forgive others.

Jesus forgave the paralytic, but He did not ask him, "Have you forgiven others?" (Mark 2:5). His forgiveness was unconditional. If I've really experienced the generosity of God's unconditional forgiveness, it will change how I deal with others. Regarding salvation, if our forgiveness is based on always forgiving others in every situation, we're probably all in trouble.

Prayer

"Thank You, Jesus, for providing what I need each day, for leading me away from temptation, and for forgiving me fully and freely. I rest in the truth that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). Help me extend that same grace to others and forgive as I have been forgiven. Amen."

DAY 16

Learning from Jesus in Matthew

Scripture

Read Matthew 6:16-18 (How to Fast)

Observation

As with giving and praying, it's not "if" we fast, but "when" we fast.

6:16—When fasting, don't contort your face to let others know you're fasting. Jesus assures us: the recognition we get from others will be our only reward.

6:17-18—Fasting isn't exactly fun. We like to have our tummies full, but we will be rewarded if we do so.

Application

When we give, pray, or fast, are we looking for an audience? Who is it? Is it the people around us or is it an audience of One—God?

We are like fish in a fishbowl. We know our physical world pretty well, but what is outside our "fishbowl" (the spiritual world)? That isn't as easy to discern. We have to be intentional to better understand it: read our Bible, pray, interact with others in church and Bible studies.

We all realize there is a spiritual world. Many people will say, "I'm a spiritual person", but what does that mean exactly? The evidence for God is overwhelming, "The heavens declare the glory of God..." (Psalm 19:1). To be pleasing in His sight means to be obedient to His desires, just as we would be obedient to an earthly king.

We all want the assurance that "we have come to know Him", and we get that assurance as we "keep His commands" (1 John 2:3).

Prayer

"Lord, You walked this earth as the Son of God, yet You were so humble that many didn't recognize it. Help me to live as You lived, not seeking public recognition, but seeking to please only You. Your presence in my life is reward enough. Amen."

DAY 17

Learning from Jesus in Matthew

Scripture

Read Matthew 6:19-34 (Relationships with Stuff)

Observation

Today and tomorrow we will finish the main section of Jesus' sermon (Matthew 5:17-7:12) on how to live righteously by seeing what Jesus has to say about our relationships with stuff and with people.

6:19-21, 24—For 1,000's of years, to own gold has been a measure of your earthly wealth, but in ancient times, clothing was also a measure of one's wealth. But clothing can wear out or be eaten by moths, and gold (if alloyed with another metal to make it more useful) can be tarnished. We have to decide, "Is it better to serve God and seek heavenly rewards or to seek earthly rewards that can be destroyed or stolen?"

6:22-23—Why mention the "eye" in the midst of talking about "our stuff"? Because the eye is described as a way to look inside us to see what we are really like. The eye is used in an interesting way in the Old Testament.

Proverbs 22:9, "Whoever is generous (literally "good eye") will be blessed."

Proverbs 23:6-7, "Don't eat the bread of a stingy (literally "bad eye") person for his heart is not with you."

6:25-34—Finances are a major concern to us, for we need money to clothe us, feed us, and put a roof over our heads. But concern can quickly grow into worry and anxiety, yet Jesus tells us 3 times, "Don't worry" (6:25, 31, 34).

Application

"Don't worry, huh? That's easier said than done!" Indeed, yet that's what He tells us. We're not to worry because He loves us and His entire creation. Yes, we live in a fallen world where there will be hardships, but He has promised that if we seek Him first, He will see that we are provided for.

The Israelites spent 40 long years in the Sinai desert, but God provided for them daily. A primary way we seek God is through prayer, and He has told us to ask daily for the bread we need for today (Matthew 6:11). This, of course, means to trust Him, to have faith in Him, but that is exactly what the Christian life is all about. "The righteous will live by faith." (Romans 1:17; Habakkuk 2:4).

"Amen" is derived from "mammon" (Matthew 6:24). It means to affirm something as trustworthy; the thing we trust in. The question we must all ask ourselves is, "Will I depend on my IRA's, social security, insurance: the safety net we build for ourselves, or will I trust in God?"

Prayer

"Father, when I concentrate on only the seen realm in which I live, it isn't easy. There's much that can, and does, go wrong. Help me to concentrate, instead, on the unseen realm in which You exist, and on the riches You have stored up for me in Christ Jesus. Amen."

DAY 18

Learning from Jesus in Matthew

Scripture

Read Matthew 7:1-12 (Relationships with People)

Observation

Jesus closes out the main section of the Sermon on the Mount with these instructions on how to deal with people, and how we get the wisdom to judge properly.

7:1-2—How are we to deal with someone who has possibly done something wrong. First, Jesus tells us to **“Proceed with caution.”** Is it possible to not judge? Not really. We judge, discern, evaluate all the time. Don’t we want our dentist to judge and evaluate the condition of our teeth?

7:3-5—Second, Jesus shows us **how to evaluate**: judge yourself first. Look inwardly to make sure your motives are right. We are rarely unbiased or consistent. Notice in verse 5 that the speck is not actually taken out. Likewise, we might point out an inconsistency in the life of someone else, but we’re not necessarily meant to condemn them or fix it ourselves.

7:6—Third, Jesus tells us **who to evaluate**. “Pearls” is a metaphor for wisdom. Don’t share everything you know with everyone because there are many who won’t appreciate it.

7:7-11—Where do we get the wisdom to judge properly? Can I trust how I’m seeing things? Am I biased? Should I point out a problem in the life of another? I need help, so we’re to seek wisdom from God (James 1:5).

Application

Gaining wisdom and knowing how to handle situations is not simple. We need to commune with our Father, get to know Him better and gain wisdom as we go. Even though Jesus explains how to do this in Matthew 18:15-20, **there is no formula**.

Paul gives a practical application of this process in 1 Corinthians 5. If someone is doing something that is disrupting the fellowship within the church, action must be taken, but condemnation can easily lead to contempt. Replace contempt with empathy and condemnation will rarely occur. After all, we often don’t know perfectly what is happening in the life of another.

7:12—All of Jesus’ instructions as to how we can practically apply God’s righteousness is summed up in the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Prayer:

“Lord, You knew just what to say, at the right time, and in the perfect way. Why can’t I do the same? Help me to do a better job in relating with others. Give me the wisdom I need to help me to make sense of what’s going on in their lives, and to say and do what will help them the most. Amen.”

DAY 19

Learning from Jesus in Matthew

Scripture

Read Matthew 7:13-14 (Choosing the Right Path)

Observation

In the Beatitudes we learned what it means to be reckoned (considered) righteous in God's sight and to know that the kingdom of heaven is ours. Jesus then gave us many examples of how we are to practice that righteousness. Jesus concludes the sermon by warning us about what we will encounter as we live out this righteousness and how to stay on the right path as we walk through this life.

7:13-14—There are two gates that are both open, each one leading down different paths. One gate leads to a wide path that is very crowded, sloping gently downward to destruction. The other gate opens onto a sparsely populated path that is narrow, winds steeply upward, but leads to life.

Jesus teaches that there are two paths in life: one is easy and popular but leads to destruction, while the other is narrow and difficult but leads to true life.

Application

Jesus quotes Isaiah 22:22 when describing the Philadelphian church (Revelation 3:7). The "key of David" refers to entrance into the kingdom of God, and Jesus holds the key. Only two of the seven churches, Philadelphia and Smyrna, were not condemned.

Philadelphia is representative of Spirit-filled churches today who open the door of salvation to anyone who desires to enter in, but it is not tribulation-free (Revelation 2:9-10). It is difficult, but it leads to the "crown of life" and "rejoicing" (Matthew 5:11-12).

This is our church, the Philadelphia church. We are called to not only choose the difficult path, but to help others along this same path.

Prayer

"Jesus, thank You that through You we are made right in God's sight and welcomed into the Kingdom of Heaven. Help us live out the righteousness You have taught us, even when it's not easy. Give us discernment to choose the narrow path that leads to life, and strength to follow You when the way is difficult. Keep our hearts focused on You, and guide us to stay on the right path as we walk with You each day. Amen."

DAY 20

Learning from Jesus in Matthew

Scripture

Read Matthew 7:15-23 (Roadblocks to entering the Kingdom)

Observation

Just as there are two (2) gates: Wide and narrow, so are there two (2) trees: good and bad.

7:15-16—Even though it would be nice to trust people and believe they have our best interests at heart, there are people we have to be wary of who want to take advantage of us. They seem innocent as sheep, but inside they are ravenous wolves. How do we recognize them? By their fruit.

7:17-20—“In the same way...” good and bad trees are recognized by their fruit. Jesus is probably thinking of religious leaders who don’t have good intentions. They give, pray, and fast only to be seen by others.

Application

It isn’t our job to judge those who are “wolves” or “bad trees.” Jesus is the only one who knows the heart of each individual, but we should use wisdom in dealing with others and not get into relationships or situations that would draw us away from the Lord.

7:21-22—He has told us from the very beginning, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”(Matthew 4:17). We are not to do our own will. We must repent and do His will.

But what about those who cry out, “Lord, Lord”, and are even doing miracles in His name? Couldn’t we be easily led astray by them? Yes, that’s why we’re told to “test the spirits to determine if they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). Stay in God’s word, ask for godly wisdom, and watch them over the long term to help determine if someone might be giving you bad advice or leading you astray.

7:23—This can be a startling verse. What if we’ve been actively following Jesus for years. Could He say to us, “I never knew you”? Note who He is talking to: those who are “lawbreakers” or “evildoers”, those who were not following the Torah or who did evil.

That doesn’t apply to anyone who has given their heart to Jesus and whose lifestyle has been changed as a result. “There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). If we are keeping His commands and producing good fruit, “...we can be sure we have come to know Him” (1 John 2:2).

Prayer

“Lord Jesus, give us wisdom to recognize truth and discernment to see fruit for what it is. Help us choose the narrow way and become people who bear good fruit—fruit that reflects Your heart, not our desire to be seen by others. Guard us from deception, shape our motives, and help our lives point others to You. Help us to remain faithful to You, to stay on the path that leads to life. Amen.”

DAY 21

Learning from Jesus in Matthew

Scripture

Read Matthew 7:24-29 (Building on a Solid Foundation)

Observation

Living in a righteous manner means knowing which of the two (2) paths to take, which of the two (2) trees to eat from, and which of the two (2) foundations to build on.

7:24-27—Living in an area that can be hit with hurricanes, these verses are particularly appropriate. It only makes sense to build on bedrock, not on shifting sands on the beach, but Jesus probably had something other than just hurricanes in mind.

Throughout Israel's history, they were inundated with enemies. Isaiah warned them of Assyria, "...the mighty rushing waters of the Euphrates River" (Isaiah 8:7). Jeremiah warned them of Babylon, described as a "well that gushes out water" (Jeremiah 6:7). Ezekiel warned them of their own false prophets whom God would judge with "torrential rain, hail, and wind" (Ezra 13:2, 11-13).

Application

It is possible to be led down the wrong path by those wanting to "scam us", to hurt us financially or spiritually. That's why we need to pay attention to Jesus' words, to follow the wisdom given us in the Scriptures.

"When Moses had finished writing" his own sermon, he recited every single word "to the entire assembly of Israel" (Deuteronomy 31:24, 30). God loves us, and the teachings of both Moses and Jesus are "...like dew, like gentle rain on new grass and showers on tender plants" (Deuteronomy 32:1-2). "His ways are perfect; He is the Rock" (Deuteronomy 32:3-4). He is the "tested stone, precious cornerstone, sure foundation" which we can safely build on for "the one who believes in Him will be unshakable" (Isaiah 28:16).

7:28-29—Jesus gave five (5) big speeches in Matthew 5-25. This is the only teaching the people responded to: "...the crowds were astonished because He taught with authority." They were thankful that, even in the lowly condition many of them were in, God loved them and was freely offering them entrance into His kingdom.

Satan is still alive and well, and very capable of deceiving us, but Jesus has been given "all authority" (Matthew 28:18). He has commissioned us in these verses to go throughout the world and make disciples.

Even though this concludes the study of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, continue to read the Bible, pray, and allow God's Spirit to keep you on the right path—the path to life, and to help others walk this path as well.

Prayer

"Jesus, thank You for teaching us how to live in Your Kingdom. Shape our hearts, renew our minds, and help us walk the narrow path that leads to life. Help us to love well, live humbly, seek righteousness, and bear good fruit. And in every season, help us to pray first—to seek You before we act, to trust You before we worry, and to rely on You in all we do. May our lives reflect Your truth and bring glory to God. Amen."

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