

Bible Study

Gods Word in Focus



Week Thirty

Sermon on the Mount

Part One of Two

The Beatitudes

Matthew 5:1-12

What is the good life, and the ultimate end or purpose of life? Is it not *happiness*, which is none other than the complete good, the sum of all goods, leaving nothing more to be desired? Jesus addresses this question in his sermon on the mount.

The word *beatitude* literally means "happiness" or "blessedness". What is the significance of Jesus' beatitudes, and why are they so central to his teaching?

The beatitudes respond to the natural desire for happiness that God has placed in every heart. They teach us the final end to which God calls us, namely the coming of God's kingdom (Matt. 4:17), the vision of God (Matt. 5:8; 1 John 2:1), entering into the joy of the Lord (Matt. 25:21-23) and into his rest (Hebrews 4:7-11).

Jesus' beatitudes also confront us with decisive choices concerning the life we pursue here on earth and the use we make of the goods he puts at our disposal. God alone satisfies.

Do you seek the *highest good*, the total good, which is above all else?

The Similitudes

Matthew 5:13-16

Jesus used ordinary images, such as salt and light, to convey extraordinary truths. What does salt and light have to teach us about God and his reign on earth? Salt was a valuable commodity in the ancient world. People traded with it, like we trade with gold and stock. Salt also served a very useful purpose in hot climates before the invention of electricity and refrigeration. Salt not only gave food flavor, it also preserved meat from spoiling. Jesus used the image of salt to describe how his disciples are to live in the world. As salt purifies, preserves, and penetrates, so the disciple must be as salt in the world of human society to purify, preserve, and penetrate that society for the kingdom of God and of his righteousness and peace.

Jesus also used the image of light and a lamp to further his illustration. Lamps in the ancient world served a vital function, much like they do today. They enable people to see and work in the dark and to avoid stumbling. The Jews also understood “light” as an expression of the inner beauty, truth, and goodness of God.

Those who listen to God and heed his voice will receive more from him. Do you know the joy and freedom of living in God’s light?

Jesus Fulfills the Law

Matthew 5:17-20

Why do people tend to view the “law of God” negatively rather than positively? Jesus’ attitude towards the law of God can be summed up in the great prayer of Psalm 119: “Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.”

For the people of Israel the “law” could refer to the ten commandments or to the five Books of Moses, called the Pentateuch, which explain the commandments and ordinances of God for his people.

The “law” also referred to the whole teaching or way of life which God gave to his people. The Jews in Jesus’ time also used it as a description of the oral or scribal law. Needless to say, the scribes added many more things to the law than God intended. That is why Jesus often condemned the scribal law. It placed burdens on people which God had not intended.

Jesus, however, made it very clear that the essence of God’s law — his commandments and way of life, must be fulfilled.

Murder

Matthew 5:21-26

Are you driven by anger or rage? The first person to hate his brother was Cain. God warned Cain: *'Why are you angry? ..Sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it* (Genesis 4:6-7). Sin doesn't just happen; it first grows as a seed in one's heart. Unless it is mastered, by God's grace, it grows like a weed and chokes the fruitful vine. Jesus addressed the issue of keeping the commandments with his disciples.

The scribes and Pharisees equated righteousness with satisfying the demands of the law. Jesus showed them how short they had come. Jesus points to the heart as the seat of desire and choice. Unless forbidden and evil desires are eradicated, the heart will be corrupted.

Jesus points to forbidden anger with one's brother. This is a selfish anger that broods and is long-lived, that nurses a grudge and keeps wrath warm, and that refuses to die. Anger in the heart as well as anger in speech or action are equally forbidden.

What is the antidote to anger and rage? Mercy, kindness, and forbearance spring from a heart full of love and forgiveness. God has forgiven us and he calls us to extend mercy and forgiveness towards those who cause us harm and grief.

Adultery and Divorce

Matthew 5:27-32

What does Jesus mean when he says “*pluck out your eye* “ or “*cut off your hand and throw it away*” if it leads you to sin? Is he exaggerating here? Jesus used forceful language to urge his disciples to choose for life — a life of joy and happiness with God -- rather than for death -- an unending life of horrible misery and separation from the loving presence of an all-good God.

Jesus set before his disciples the one goal in life that is worth any sacrifice and that goal is the conformity of our will with God and what he desires for our well-being and happiness with him.

Just as a doctor might remove a limb or some part of the body in order to preserve the life of the whole body, so we must be ready to part with anything that causes us to sin and which inevitably leads to spiritual death.

Jesus warns us of the terrible responsibility that we must set no stumbling block in the way of another, that is, not give offense or bad example that might lead another to sin. The young in faith are especially vulnerable to the bad example of those who should be passing on the faith.

Oaths

Matthew 5:33-37

How forceful are honest words! (Job 6:25) Jesus addressed the issue of honesty and truthfulness in one's conduct and speech. What does it mean to be true to one's word? To be true to oneself and to others requires character.

Unfortunately many people today miserably fail here. No wonder we don't trust many in positions of leadership and influence. God is the source of all truth and there is nothing false or deceitful in him. His word is truth and his law is truth. His truth liberates us from illusion, deceit, and hypocrisy.

Jesus told his disciples that *the truth will make you free* (John 8:32). Why is it so hard to be true and to speak the truth? Truth demands commitment -- that we live our lives according to it and be faithful witnesses of the truth. Jesus teaches his disciples the unconditional love of truth. He speaks against bearing false witness and all forms of untruthfulness and swearing unnecessary oaths to God.

A disciple's word should be capable of being trusted without verbal rituals to give it validity. Christ's disciple must speak truthfully without "stretching" the truth by adding to it or by compromising the truth by speaking untruth or by leaving out what is necessary to convey what is truthful.

Retaliation

Matthew 5:38-42

If someone insults you or tries to take advantage of you, how do you respond? Do you repay in kind? Jesus approached the question of just retribution with a surprising revelation of God's intention for how we should treat others, especially those who mistreat us.

When Jesus spoke about God's law, he did something no one had done before. He gave a new standard based not just on the requirements of justice – giving each their due – but based on the law of love and mercy.

Jesus knew the law and its intention better than any jurist or legal expert could imagine. He quoted from the oldest recorded law in the world (also known as the *lex talionis* or *law of retaliation*): "*If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe*" (Exodus 21:23-25; see also Leviticus 24:19,20 and Deuteronomy 19:21). Such a law today seems cruel, but it was meant to limit vengeance as a first step towards mercy. This law was not normally taken literally but served as a guide for a judge in a law court for assessing punishment and penalty (see Deuteronomy 19:18).

Love

Matthew 5:43-48

What makes Christians different from others and what makes Christianity distinct from any other religion? It is *grace* – treating others not as they deserve but as God wishes them to be treated – with loving-kindness and mercy.

God is good to the unjust as well as the just. His love embraces saint and sinner alike. God seeks our highest good and teaches us to seek the greatest good of others, even those who hate and abuse us.

Our love for others, even those who are ungrateful and selfish towards us, must be marked by the same kindness and mercy which God has shown to us. It is easier to show kindness and mercy when we can expect to benefit from doing so. How much harder when we can expect nothing in return.

Our prayer for those who do us ill both breaks the power of revenge and releases the power of love to do good in the face of evil.

How can we possibly love those who cause us harm or ill-will? With God all things are possible. He gives power and grace to those who believe and accept the gift of the Holy Spirit. His love conquers all, even our hurts, fears, prejudices and griefs.