



THE  
MENTORING  
PROJECT

# THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT



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# INTRODUCTION

## ***Jesus' Yoke — Christianity as a Life of Mentorship***

Throughout the last two thousand years, there is one symbol that has been central to Christian art, theology, jewelry, architecture, banners and even tattoos: the cross. Images and statues throughout Christendom highlight Jesus' cross. Countless sermons and books speak about the importance of the cross. Churches and ministries regularly have "cross" in their name. And until recent times, most churches were built in the shape of a cross with the altar at the center point.

This cross-centeredness is understandable. Jesus willingly died a sacrificial death on a cross (Matt. 26:33–50). Jesus spoke regularly of the necessity of his disciples to take up their own crosses and follow him (Matt. 10:38; 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 14:27). The Apostle Paul frequently spoke about the Christian life as embracing the cross of Christ, including its pain and shame (1 Cor. 1:17–28; Gal. 6:14; Col. 1:19–23).

Yet there is another important symbol that Jesus uses that has not played as central a role in Christian thinking as the cross, but I think it should: the yoke. A close study of the Gospel of Matthew shows that even though it is only found in one text, the yoke is central to the theology and purpose of Matthew's Gospel and to all of Jesus' ministry. In Matthew 11:28–30, after boldly claiming his unique role as the revealer of God (11:25–27), Jesus invites people to take his yoke upon their lives.

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matt. 11:28–30)

The yoke and the cross are both made of wood, but the yoke is an agricultural image rather than a symbol of execution. The yoke pictures a farmer patiently guiding an animal down a long field row, giving the ox or

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cow direction as it plows the earth and prepares the ground for planting.

What Jesus means by his invitation to take his yoke upon our necks is immediately explained — it means to “learn from me” (11:29). The word translated “learn” here is the word for “become a disciple,” that is, a person who becomes the student of a master teacher, who learns from an expert’s words and example. While the cross speaks of self-sacrifice, the yoke speaks about discipleship, or mentorship. This is Christianity: Jesus’ invitation to learn from him the way to find true shalom, the flourishing life we were made for and long for. Jesus is saying that this true rest will only be found in taking *his* yoke upon our lives, becoming disciples of *him*, submitting to *him* as our true mentor.

# 1

## THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW AS A DISCIPLE-MAKING BOOK

The image of Jesus as a teacher, disciple-maker, and mentor is found throughout all of the Gospels, but no place so clearly as in the Gospel of Matthew. From beginning to end, the Gospel of Matthew speaks about discipleship, and the whole story is structured as a disciple-making book.

When John the Baptist comes preaching, his message is a call to repentance because of the coming of the kingdom of heaven (3:2). Jesus says the exact same thing as he begins his ministry (4:17). The call to repentance is not a message of condemnation, but of invitation. The call to repentance is not a message of heaped-up guilt but an urgent call to turn from one way of seeing and being in the world to God's way of life. Repentance is discipleship language.

The famous climactic conclusion to Matthew likewise emphasizes discipleship. In his "Great Commission" (Matt. 28:16–20), Jesus sends forth his disciples with his own authority to "make disciples" of people from every nation. This discipleship is life-on-life mentorship rooted in the Triune God (in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit) and looks like baptizing and teaching people. Baptizing is an invitation for people to identify with Jesus and enter into the community of his other disciples. Teaching is an invitation to learn to inhabit the world according to Jesus' instructions regarding doctrine, morality, habits, and sensibilities that Jesus himself models. This is mentorship and there is nothing more central to Christianity than this.

But this emphasis on discipleship is not just at the beginning and the end of Matthew's Gospel. Between the opening call to repentance and the closing commission to go and make disciples, the whole Gospel of Matthew is built on a disciple-making vision. Matthew communicates this by structuring the main part of his Gospel around five big teaching blocks (chapters 5–7, 10, 13, 18, 23–25). These blocks are collections of Jesus' teachings for the purpose of discipleship.

In the ancient world, many biographies were written about famous teach-

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ers and philosophers. The sayings of a teacher were often collected into memorable compilations based on a theme, called “epitomes.” If someone wanted to learn a certain philosophy of life or religion, an epitome provided them a handy, accessible set of instructions to meditate upon and practice in real life. These epitomes were especially important because so few people in the ancient world had any access to education, and most people could not read or write beyond basic signs. Having a memorable block of teachings based on a theme was crucial to being mentored.

So Matthew, who is himself a disciple of Jesus and committed to obeying the Lord’s command to make more disciples, wrote a masterful biography about Jesus the teacher with this purpose: to invite people to repent and take Jesus’ yoke upon their lives so that they might find life. In short, Matthew is inviting us to be mentored into the way of Christian kingdom discipleship. The stories of what Jesus did and the collections of his teachings were essential for this goal.

Matthew’s Gospel is organized like this, with the five teaching blocks highlighted:

- I. Origins and Beginnings (1:1–4:22)
  - A. Introduction (1:1–4:16)
  - B. Bridge (4:17–22)
- II. Revelation and Separation: In Word and Deed (4:23–9:38)
  - A. First Epitome (5:1–7:29)**
  - B. First Narrative (8:1–9:38)
- III. Revelation and Separation: As Master, So Disciples (10:1–12:50)
  - A. Second Epitome (10:1–11:1)**
  - B. Second Narrative (11:2–12:50)
- IV. Revelation and Separation: A New, Set-Apart People of God (13:1–17:27)
  - A. Third Epitome (13:1–53)**
  - B. Third Narrative (13:54–17:27)
- V. Revelation and Separation: Inside and Outside the New Community (18:1–20:34)
  - A. Fourth Epitome (18:1–19:1)**
  - B. Fourth Narrative (19:2–20:34)
- VI. Revelation and Separation: Judgment Now and in the Future (21:1–25:46)
  - A. Fifth Narrative (21:1–22:46)
  - B. Fifth Epitome (23:1–25:46)**
- VII. Endings and Beginnings (26:1–28:20)
  - A. Bridge (26:1–16)
  - B. Conclusion (26:17–28:20)

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Thus, we can see that the whole Gospel is dedicated to disciple-making and these five epitomes give the highest concentration of mentoring material.

### ***Focusing on the Famous: The Sermon on the Mount***

Throughout the church's history, the first of these epitomes — Matthew 5–7 — has been the most influential, preached, studied, written about, and famous portion of the entire Bible. Since at least the days of Augustine, these chapters have been given the title, “The Sermon on the Mount.”

Differences between denominations and theological traditions can be traced back to how differently they interpret these fundamental chapters. I often describe the Sermon on the Mount like a swimming pool test strip that shows chlorine levels, pH balance, and alkalinity. If we were to dip any theologian or denomination into the Sermon on the Mount, it would immediately tell us much about their theological understanding and commitments. This is because the Sermon touches on so many important truths, such as the relationship of the Old Testament to the teachings of Jesus, what it means to be righteous in God's eyes, how to treat other people, and how to relate to money.

The Sermon on the Mount does not give us *everything* we want or need to know to be faithful disciples of Jesus. It's only one of the five teaching blocks in Matthew, it's part of other teachings in Matthew, and we have the whole rest of the Bible too! But the sermon is famous for a reason: It is expansive, profound, and foundational for the life of discipleship. These three chapters are an excellent place to start in learning to take Jesus' yoke upon one's life and to be mentored by him, the King of kings and the Wisdom of God incarnate.

Jesus concludes his most famous sermon with an image of two people who build the house of their lives in different ways (Matt. 7:24–27) — one who is foolish and one who is wise. The foolish person hears Jesus' teachings but does nothing with them. The wise person hears and puts Jesus' words into practice. The reason this is the final image in the sermon is because the whole message of Matthew 5–7 is an invitation to wisdom. Wisdom can be defined as *practiced ways of inhabiting the world that accord with God's kingdom and result in the true human flourishing we long for*. This is the discipleship into which Jesus invites us. This is the yoke he is offering us if we are willing to be mentored by it.

Even as the whole Gospel of Matthew is intentionally structured, so too is the sermon on the Mount. The sermon is not a random collection of sayings from Jesus, but a highly-crafted and beautifully structured message. Jesus' sermon is organized like this:



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- A. Introduction: The Call to God's People (5:3–16)
  - 1. Nine Beatitudes for the New People of God (5:3–12)
  - 2. The New Covenant Witness of the People of God (5:13–16)
- B. Main Theme: The Greater Righteousness (GR) for God's People (5:17–7:12)
  - 1. GR in Relation in Obeying God's Laws (5:17–48)
    - a. Proposition (5:17–20)
    - b. Six Exegeses/Examples (5:21–47)
    - c. Summary (5:48)
  - 2. GR in our Piety toward God (6:1–21)
    - a. Introduction: Pleasing the Father in Heaven, not Humans (6:1)
    - b. Three Examples (6:2–18)
    - \*\* Central Excursus on Prayer (6:7–15)
    - c. Conclusion: Rewards in Heaven, not on Earth (6:19–21)
  - 3. GR in our Relation to the World (6:19–7:12)
    - a. Introduction (6:19–21)
    - b. In Relation to the Goods of This World (6:22–34)
    - c. In Relation to the People of This World (7:1–6)
    - d. Conclusion (7:7–12)
- C. Conclusion: An Invitation to Wisdom in Light of the Future (7:13–27)
  - 1. Two Kinds of Paths (7:13–14)
  - 2. Two Kinds of Prophets (7:15–23)
  - 3. Two Kinds of Builders (7:24–27)

As we can see, the Sermon follows a classic structure of Introduction, Main Theme, and Conclusion. Each part plays a role in the overall message. That message is an invitation to wisdom, to the life of shalom and flourishing that comes from taking Jesus' yoke upon our lives.

In what follows, we will walk through each section of Jesus' sermon, seeking to understand the wisdom he is teaching. We will not be able to say everything there is to say about Jesus' teachings here,<sup>1</sup> but we will combine some sections and follow the general outline asking the question, "What does it look like to be mentored by Jesus?"

### ***Discussion & Reflection:***

- 1. What are some ways that you are tempted to not inhabit the world according to God's kingdom?
- 2. In which areas in your life do you wish to see greater flourishing?

## 2

# RETOOLING OUR NOTIONS OF HAPPINESS (5:3–16)

As a pastor, one of the questions I regularly ask people is, “What message did you receive when you were growing up about how to find a good life?”

This is a very important question to ask ourselves because we all did receive some kind of message, and that message has continued to influence the course of our lives for good or for bad, whether we realize it or not.

Everyone I’ve asked this question can come up with some answer. Many people immediately respond with a short saying that a parent or uncle or mentor said to them repeatedly. Sayings like:

- “You’ll never work a day in your life if you love what you do.”
- “Work hard. Get good grades. Find a good spouse.”
- “Love God. Love others.”
- “Live with your eulogy in mind.”
- “Don’t worry about what anyone else thinks. Just be yourself.”

Or, if *Star Wars* played an important role, you might have heard:

- “Do or do not, there is no try” from Master Yoda.

We call these short, pithy sayings “aphorisms.” Aphorisms are words of wisdom to guide us through a myriad of unpredictable life situations. In the ancient world, there was a kind of aphorism that wisdom teachers used called a *macarism*, from the Greek word that means to be truly happy or to flourish (*makarios*). A macarism is a statement describing a way of living that is good and beautiful. A macarism is an invitation to adopt a certain mindset and set of habits so that we might find true human flourishing.

Macarisms were usually used in conjunction with their opposites: woes. Woes are not curses. They are warnings that certain ways of inhabiting the world will result in loss and grief. So too, macarisms are not blessings. They are invitations to the good life. When combined, macarisms and

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woes are often described as two ways or two paths of life that diverge and end up in very different experiences.

This combination of macarisms and woes is found throughout the Bible as the invitation to Godward wisdom, as the difference between the path of life and the path of destruction. For example, the whole book of Proverbs is full of such aphorisms, especially the first nine chapters, which are built on the idea of two ways. King Solomon paints a picture for his son of two different paths for living; one path will bring life and the other destruction. Likewise, Psalm 1, commonly referred to as a wisdom psalm, depicts two paths that people's lives can take — one that exists under the influence of fools and the other where a person meditates on God's instructions and lets this wisdom guide their life. The foolish way leads to a life that is no better than dust that blows away in the wind. The wise way is pictured as a verdant tree planted by a stream of water that bears fruit over many years.

This is exactly what Jesus is saying in the opening part of the sermon. As the final and faithful Son of David, the King of God's kingdom, and incarnation of wisdom itself, Jesus is offering to all people the way of inhabiting the world that promises true happiness, not only for this age but in the eternal New Creation as well. This is how Jesus introduces his sermon, with nine macarisms about the truly good life.

For at least 1,500 years, these opening macarisms have been called the Beatitudes. This description comes from the Latin word *béatus* which means the same thing as *makarios* — “happy” or “flourishing.” Christians have always understood Matthew 5:3–12 as invitations to the truly flourishing life that can be found through Jesus, the same Jesus who said elsewhere that he has come “that they might have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10)

However, today there is a lot of confusion about what the Beatitudes are. Nearly every modern English Bible translates Jesus' *makarios* statements with the English “Blessed.” “Blessed are the poor in spirit... blessed are those who mourn,” etc. This is a very different idea. If we read Jesus' Beatitudes as statements of blessing, then we must ask what this means. Is Jesus saying that God will bless the people who live in the ways he describes in 5:3–12? Are these new entrance requirements for getting into the kingdom? Or are these simply describing the kind of people who will be blessed by God when the kingdom comes (which still amounts to something like a requirement)? These questions misunderstand the nature of a macarism. With the Beatitudes, Jesus is inviting us to adopt his true understanding of the world so that we might find true life. These are

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not entrance requirements or mere statements about the future. They are a new vision for how to find true life through following him.

What is shocking is not that Jesus paints us a picture of the truly flourishing life. What is shocking is the way he describes this life in God's kingdom. Jesus' macarisms are not at all what any of us would expect or naturally desire. When we read Jesus' nine statements about where true life is to be found, with the exception of one, his statements are all unexpectedly negative!

- Flourishing ["blessed"] are the poor in spirit...
- Flourishing are those who mourn...
- Flourishing are the meek...
- Flourishing are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...
- Flourishing are the merciful...
- Flourishing are the pure in heart... [the only potentially positive one]
- Flourishing are the peacemakers...
- Flourishing are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake...
- Flourishing are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account...

Notice these images — poverty, mourning, meekness, hunger and thirst, persecution. The notions of peacemaking and mercy may sound more positive, but these too are negative images of giving up our rights for the sake of reconciling relationships with others.

What is going on here? The key to understanding Jesus' macarisms is to pay attention to what he says in the second half as well:

- ... for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- ... for they shall be comforted.
- ... for they shall inherit the earth.
- ... for they shall be satisfied.
- ... for they shall receive mercy.
- ... for they shall see God.
- ... for they shall be called the sons of God.
- ... for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus is retooling our notions of the good life by inviting us to orient our lives around our relationship with God as the one who will provide all we long for and need. The reason he can say that these negative states — humility, mourning, loss of power, giving up rights to forgive others, embracing misrepresentation and persecution — are happiness is because

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in those places our hearts are redirected to God and he meets us there. The key to the truly good life, Jesus is saying, is found in a reorientation of our lives toward God and his kingdom (see also Matt. 6:33) — including the fact that this will entail suffering, loss, and grief in the midst of true happiness.

This is what the famous “salt and light” verses are about in 5:13–16. Jesus is calling his disciples to follow in his ways in the world, to be heralds of the new covenant message he is bringing into the world. Because this will bring opposition and loss (see especially Matt. 10), his disciples will be tempted to shrink back from Jesus’ ways, to cease to be salty and to cover their light. But this is not the way of discipleship. Instead, Jesus says to “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (5:16).

So what is the mentoring message here?

We all desire to live a meaningful and happy life. Jesus and the Bible are not opposed to this. Indeed, Jesus begins his first sermon in the New Testament with this message. Our problem is not the desire for happiness but our foolishness and blindness in trying to find it in places other than in God. As C.S. Lewis famously said it,

It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased. (“The Weight of Glory”)

Here at the beginning of the sermon, Jesus invites us to take on his mentoring yoke in retooling our notions for the good life around God and his coming kingdom, following the ways of mercy, humility, enduring suffering, and longing that Jesus himself models.

### ***Discussion & Reflection***

1. How is this explanation of Jesus’ beatitudes similar or different from how you’ve previously understood them?
2. Why should we want to take on Jesus’ mentoring yoke — living in the wisdom of the Sermon on the Mount?

### 3

## WHAT DOES GOD CARE ABOUT IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS? (5:17–5:48)

One of the most perplexing and complicated questions for Christians is how to think about the Old Testament and its teachings in relation to the New Testament. Do the commands of the Old Testament still apply for Christians? Does God expect the same thing of his people in the New Testament as he does in the Old?

Different theologians and denominations have come to very different conclusions on these important questions, and two thousand years of reflection have not solved them definitively. These are not merely academic questions. They affect how we think about God as well as what parts of the Old Testament, if any, continue to apply on a daily basis to God's people in the new covenant.

These huge questions are at the heart of the main part of Jesus' sermon (5:17–7:12). We can't solve the dilemma completely from these verses; we need the whole New Testament to make sense of this. But this part of the sermon is the single most important section of Christianity's answer to these issues.

Jesus directly addresses the issue of Torah (Mosaic instructions) as it relates to Christianity in 5:17: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." In this profound statement, Jesus simultaneously affirms the goodness of what God did and commanded in the history of Israel *and* indicates that something new and different is coming through himself. Jesus affirms both *continuity* and *discontinuity* between the Old Testament/Judaism and Christianity. He is not abolishing, but he is fulfilling.

The many things Jesus says about doing God's will in 5:17–7:12 unpack and explain what this continuity and discontinuity look like. The disconti-

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nunity is found in Jesus serving as the final arbiter and interpreter of God's will. He exercises his authority to pronounce definitively how to interpret the Law and the Prophets ("you've heard it said but I say to you..."). At the end of the sermon, Jesus reiterates that it is *his* words that now stand as the final word: "Everyone who hears these words *of mine* and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock" (7:24).

When we keep reading in Matthew, we see Jesus continue to claim divine authority, such as the ability to forgive sin (9:6), exercising control over nature itself (14:13–33), and the proclamation that no one can know God except through him (11:25–27). This "all authority on heaven and on earth" that he possesses fully after his resurrection (28:18–20) is transferred to his church, the ongoing group of his disciples throughout the world (18:18–20; 10:40; 21:21). All of this is discontinuity. There is a new era, a new covenant between God and humanity that is available for anyone who follows him in faith (26:28), whether Jew or Gentile, apart from the old Mosaic covenant (Rom. 3:21–26; Gal. 3:15–29; Heb. 9:15–28).

But there is also continuity between what God has said in the past and what Jesus is teaching now. God has not changed, and his will and his righteousness have not changed. Christians are part of a new covenant with Christ as the mediator, but the heart of what God wills for his people has not changed, because he never commands anything that does not accord with who he is. The Jewish-specific aspects of the Mosaic covenant have ended because their purpose has been fulfilled — to raise up the seed, Jesus, who would fulfill the promises to Abraham to bless *all* nations (Gal. 3:15–29). There is a *new* covenant to which everyone — Jew or Gentile — must belong to be God's people. But the heart of God's will for his creatures has not changed. This is what 5:17–7:12 is all about.

The statement that hangs over and guides all of Jesus' teachings here is found in 5:20: "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." At first this may sound like Jesus is saying that we have to do even more righteous things than the saints of the Old Testament and especially the very pious Pharisees. This is not a pleasant prospect. Nor is it Jesus' point. Rather, his point is that we must have a righteousness that is not only external (behavior) but also internal (in the heart). The "righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees" is both external *and* internal. It is not a greater quantity of righteous things that we do behaviorally but rather, it is behavior that is rooted in a heart that sees and loves God.

What Jesus is saying here is in complete continuity with everything God

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said in the Old Testament; God has always seen and cared about our hearts, not only our actions. To be holy is to be whole. Good deeds with a dead heart are not what God wants. We must be whole/consistent even as our heavenly Father is whole/consistent (5:48, which is what “perfect” means there). This is what Jesus is teaching throughout 5:17–7:12.

So what is the mentoring message here in 5:17–48?

Simply put: To be a mentored disciple of Jesus means we must look inside at our hearts, not just concentrate on our external good behavior. Jesus applies this whole-person “greater righteousness” idea to six ways we relate to other people. The following list provides examples. They are not a comprehensive set of instructions but are meant to retrain our thinking about the importance of our hearts when we relate to each other.

- The first example concerns anger, resentment, and hatred to other people (5:21–26). Jesus acknowledges that murder is wrong. But he presses into the heart issue under the ultimate act of murder — anger and resentment toward someone else. He challenges his disciples to look inside and deal with the root issue.
- The second and third examples concern the powerful human experience of sexuality and its outworking in marriage (5:27–32). Adultery is wrong, Jesus affirms. But disciples cannot be content that they have not committed adultery when their hearts are full of lust (5:27–30). Disciples cannot treat the sacred bond of marriage from the place of a hardened heart and thus flippantly divorce (5:31–32; see further explanation in 19:1–10).
- In the fourth example, Jesus addresses being a whole person regarding follow-through with our words (5:33–37). If one makes an external commitment or a promise, it should be matched by an internal will to do what was said.
- In the fifth and sixth examples, Jesus presses the necessity of wholeness into the most difficult relationships — those who are wronging us and those who are our enemies (5:38–48). In both cases, Jesus calls his disciples to move from a heart of retaliation to one of love. Even as God the Father is gracious to his children and his enemies, so too must Jesus’ disciples be toward our enemies.

### ***Discussion & Reflection:***

1. Why does God not want only our actions to align with his Word?
2. How has Matthew 5:17–48 challenged you regarding your relationships?



# 4

## WHAT DOES GOD CARE ABOUT IN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM? (6:1–21)

In 5:17–20, Jesus has stated clearly that what he is teaching is not opposed to what God said in the past. He is bringing the New Covenant, which *does* redefine who the people of God are and how to have access to God — only through him. But the righteousness God requires has not changed. We must be transformed in our hearts, not just in our external behavior. Jesus now applies this to our spiritual practices done to honor God.

In 6:1 Jesus states clearly how the wholeness/greater righteousness principle applies to our spiritual practices. Disciples must be careful and attentive not only to their practices but also to their motives: “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them.” Our heart-level motives matter, not just the things we do.

Jesus gives three real-time examples of both the good and the bad ways of working out our piety: our almsgiving, our praying, and our fasting. This is not a comprehensive list of spiritual practices, but models of how to work out what he is teaching. Each of these practices is good; Jesus is not critiquing them. But in each case, disciples must pay attention to their internal motivations.

In 6:2–4 Jesus addresses the good practice of giving money to those in need. Almsgiving is different from tithing and other forms of giving to support the Temple or church. It is sacrificial giving to specific needs of people. Almsgiving is part of the care for the poor that God commands throughout the Old Testament (Deut. 15:7–11; Ps. 41:1; Gal. 2:10; James 2:14–17). Nothing has changed here. But Jesus points out that it is possible to do this good work in an open and flashy way for the purpose of gaining honor and respect from others. True disciples will resist that motive and help those in need in ways that don’t pursue enhancing one’s status. This does not mean that all gifts must necessarily be in cash so that no one knows who gave the money. This does not mean that if we help someone

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move their furnishings, we have to show up in a ski mask, with our license plates removed, and our voices altered so no one knows we are the ones helping. But it does mean that we must be vigilant with ourselves and pay attention to our motives, resisting self-aggrandizement.

In 6:5–6 Jesus addresses our prayer lives. Just as with giving to help those in need, it is very possible to pray in such a way that we garner honor and awe from others. It is possible to become a very skilled professional prayer whose eloquence and public frequency becomes a source of self-promotion. Jesus' disciples should resist this temptation but instead focus on praying to the Father in a sincere and personal way, not praying as a performance. As with almsgiving, this does not mean we can never pray publicly or corporately. The Old and New Testaments and the history of the church are full of good examples of praying with others. But it does mean we must be sensitive to the potential to pray with motives of gaining honor.

While he is on this topic, Jesus presses further into the issue of what our praying should look like by giving us what is called The Lord's Prayer (6:9–13). Jesus' disciples should not approach God like pagans do, babbling with many words to try to convince a distant God to hear them, as if prayer were a magical incantation (6:7). Rather, Christians know God as Father, even as Jesus does, and therefore we can pray in a different way. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus offers guidelines for the kind of praying that is not for show but is sincere and directed to God in relationship.

In 6:18–19 Jesus gives his third example of what whole-person piety looks like, this time addressing fasting. Fasting — abstaining from food for a dedicated time to focus on our dependence on him — is something Jews and Christians have practiced for millennia. Jesus expects and commends this practice among his disciples. However, as with almsgiving and praying, it is all too easy to exercise the good practice of fasting in a way that seeks the honor of others. It is possible to fast in a way that draws attention to one's piety. Instead, Jesus invites his disciples into a different way of fasting, focusing not on the external appearance but on the close connection to God as Father.

Jesus concludes this threefold discussion of paying attention to our hearts in acts of piety with a final exhortation: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth" where they can be destroyed, but instead "store up for yourselves treasures in heaven" where they cannot be destroyed (6:19–20). This is another way of saying what he said back in 6:1, where he warned that, if you practice your piety with wrong motives, "you will have no reward from your Father in heaven." In each example Jesus uses the

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exact same language — the heart-motives make the difference between whether one receives a reward from the Father in heaven (6:4, 6, 18) or the temporary and fleeting “reward” of the praise of other people, which is really no reward at all (6:2, 5, 16).

So what is the mentoring message in 6:1–21?

Once again: To be a disciple of Jesus means we must look inside at our hearts, not just outside at our good behavior. Acts of piety — almsgiving, prayer, and fasting — are good because they shape our lives. But such external righteousness is insufficient if we do not examine our hearts and motives. The Pharisees model for us the potential of being a good religious person but not truly having a relationship with God the Father.

Once we start hearing this message from Jesus it is easy to fall into despair and de-motivation, because an honest person knows that motives are never completely clear and pure. Even when we seek complete sincerity, our giving to others, our praying, our fasting, our teaching, our evangelizing, etc., are never free from mixture. Jesus’ point is not to paralyze us with morbid introspection that prevents us from doing good until we know that our hearts are totally pure. That will not happen until we are fully redeemed in the New Creation. Instead, Jesus is calling his disciples to live in awareness of our hearts. As we take his yoke of discipleship upon our lives, it will shape our motives, sensibilities, and affections. We will have seasons of growth and seasons of drought. We will make progress in one area of our hearts and stumble in others. But over time, we will see growth in wholeness as we learn from him.

### ***Questions for Reflection***

1. What would it look like in your daily life for you to pray to God as your “Father in Heaven”?
2. In what ways are you tempted to make spiritual practices about gaining approval and honor from people, rather than honoring God?
3. Do you struggle with obeying Jesus when you know your motives aren’t 100% pure? Why should you still take the next step of faithfulness?

## 5

# WHAT DOES GOD CARE ABOUT IN OUR RELATIONSHIP TO THE THINGS AND PEOPLE OF THE WORLD? (6:19–7:12)

In ancient Greek writing, authors would often make clever plays on words, using the same words to communicate two different ideas, much like we do still in poetry and song lyrics today. In Matthew 6:19–21, Jesus does just this. The exhortation to treasure up treasures in heaven rather than on earth is the conclusion to what Jesus was saying about spiritual rewards in 6:1–18. At the same time, the exhortation to treasure up treasures in heaven rather than on earth is also the introduction to 6:22–7:12.

In this third part of the main section of the Sermon (6:19–7:12), Jesus continues the same message — being righteous is more than having godly external behavior; it must also come from a transformed heart. Righteousness that is only skin-deep is insufficient (5:20). Instead, to be a disciple is to be one who is pursuing *wholeness* — conformity to the Father’s will both inside and out (5:48).

In 6:19–7:12 Jesus applies the wholeness theme to the disciples’ relationship to the goods and people of the world, to money and to relationships. What we treasure becomes what we love and who we are in the inside. This is what Jesus means by saying, “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (6:21). Jesus first shows how this heart-treasure principle works out in the disciple’s relationship to money. Using an image that is less familiar to modern readers, Jesus points out that money has the potential to turn our hearts toward greed and jealousy. The unhealthy or greedy eye makes the whole soul dark (6:22–24). He then describes the attempt to pursue both money and God as the impossible job of serving two different and opposite masters. The result will be loyalty to one and disloyalty to the other; there is no way to truly love both God and wealth (6:24).

Pushing this idea further, Jesus addresses the issue of anxiety about mon-

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ey and all that it can supply us (6:25–34). Of course, life as a human is always full of worries and anxieties; it is very natural to have concerns about our future, our children and grandchildren, friends, church, country, and the world. Jesus is not condemning natural concerns, nor recommending a detached, non-emotional life. But he is pointing out that when we try to serve both God and money, the result is not the security and joy we expect. When we try to provide for ourselves while saying we trust the Father, the result is not the safety and peace we think this will bring. Quite the opposite, this kind of dual-heartedness creates anxiety. Anxiety about money and all that it can supply us is the inevitable result of trying to live a split life between the present and an imagined future. This splitting of the soul is the opposite of being whole (5:48) and therefore will not bring flourishing, but more uncertainty.

The means to avoid this anxiety-creating attempt at loving God and money is two-fold. Jesus' disciples must consciously remember the care and provision of their heavenly Father, and they must reorient their heart-life commitments toward the coming kingdom.

To remember the heavenly Father's care, we need look no further than creation itself. Birds do not have the ability to plant fields and yet God provides for them (6:26). Flowers do not have the ability to sew clothes and yet God provides for them (6:28–29). God's children are worth infinitely more than fleeting birds and fading flowers. Therefore, we can be confident God will provide for us. We should consciously remind ourselves of his fatherly care to calm our anxious hearts.

Ultimately, we must also consciously reorient our energy, calendar commitments, and bank accounts to kingdom priorities. Jesus invites his disciples to “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” with the promise that as we do this, God will provide all our daily needs (6:33).

In 7:1–6 Jesus continues teaching us that kingdom disciples are those who humbly examine their hearts in how they evaluate and judge others. Comparing ourselves to others and attempting to shore up our own identity by critiquing other people is not the way of life nor the righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20). To redirect us, Jesus gives a sober warning that sooner or later, the way we evaluate others will be justly turned on us (7:1). To drive home the point, Jesus gives the comical image of a person trying to remove a speck of dust from someone else's eye while they have a huge plank sticking out of their own (7:1–5). This reminds us of Jesus' parable about the servant who was forgiven much but then refused to forgive his fellow servant (Matt. 18:21–35). Jesus' disciples

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are ones who instead live with wisdom in how they interact with others (7:6) and whose lives are marked by mercy, compassion, and forgiveness (5:7, 9, 21–26, 43–48).

To conclude the main section of the sermon, Jesus speaks words of great comfort and encouragement to his disciples about the heavenly Father's gracious care (7:7–11). God the Father is not like other gods of the ancient world — fickle, unreliable, ultimately unknowable. Rather, he is a father who joyfully, generously, and whole-heartedly gives good gifts to his children. We need only ask.

All of Jesus' teachings about whole-hearted living in relationship to the goods and people of the world (6:19–7:12) can be summed up with Jesus' memorable saying, "In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (7:12). Jesus has not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them (5:17). He is bringing about a New Covenant and the redefinition of the people of God as all those who follow him. But God has always seen and cared about our inner person, our hearts. God wants us to live in the ways of his kingdom, but this righteousness must not be merely external, but internal as well. As we seek his kingdom, this kind of righteousness through a relationship with God as Father, we will begin to find the flourishing or blessedness that Jesus spoke of in 5:3–12.

So what is the mentoring message in 6:19–7:12?

The issue of money in our lives is always very personal. Money, wealth, and the things of the world are realities that everyone struggles with to some degree — and most people to a large degree. As has been observed, the person who says they are unaffected by wealth is like the alcoholic who says he can take just one more drink. Money and all that it provides for us touches on heart-level issues of our security, identity, and worth.

Jesus does not shy back from addressing our relationship with money, and rightly so. His invitation to true human flourishing through becoming whole requires that we look inside and pay diligent attention to the ways we are tempted to lay up treasures on earth rather than in heaven, the ways in which we so often try to serve two masters at once — God and wealth. The result of this split life is not peace but anxiety. So the mentored disciple will be willing to let Jesus speak into his or her life at this core level of money and all the things it promises to provide us, consciously and continually reorienting our commitment to "seek first the kingdom of his righteousness" (6:33).

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So too in our relationships with others. Heart-level honesty requires us to pay attention to all the ways we tend to judge and critique others. To be a mentored disciple is to be one who does the diligent work of resisting this critical posture toward others. Instead, we humbly turn to God as Father and ask him to do our plank removal.

The Father's desire for his children is that they find freedom, peace, and flourishing in their relationship to the goods and people of the world. This will only happen as we open our hearts to this inner work to make us whole.

### ***Questions for Reflection***

1. How has anxiety about money and all it offers manifested itself in your life? In what areas do you need to more fully seek first the kingdom of God?
2. Why is it easy to see the faults of others, but not our own? How can you invite accountability into your life so that you can see the various "specks" in your eye?

## 6

# JESUS' INVITATION TO A LIFE OF WISDOM AND FLOURISHING (7:13–27)

As noted above, the Sermon on the Mount is structured in three parts — the invitation to true flourishing and shalom (5:3–16), the main theme of true righteousness, which means being consistent in our actions and hearts (5:17–7:12), and finally, a series of invitations to find true life (7:13–27). These parts are not disconnected. They can all be summed up under the umbrella idea of Wisdom. Wisdom is the Bible's big category to describe God's will for his people and the means by which we find shalom, peace, and flourishing. Wisdom is described as being with God in the beginning, inviting all people to find life through reorienting their lives to God's ways (Prov. 8:1–36). And ultimately, wisdom becomes a person — Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate (1 Cor. 1:24; see also Matt. 11:25–30).

The whole Sermon on the Mount should be thought of as an invitation to wisdom, much like the book of Proverbs, Psalm 1, the Epistle of James, and many other parts of the Bible. If this is not clear to a hearer of the sermon so far, it will become exceedingly clear in Jesus' conclusion.

Typically, wisdom is described in contrast with its opposite, foolishness. Our lives are depicted as a path with constant forks in the road. We can choose the path of foolishness that results in loss and grief and destruction. Or we can choose the path of wisdom that results in life, flourishing, and peace (see Psalm 1 again).

This “two-ways” kind of teaching and exhortation is what we find in Jesus' three-part conclusion to his sermon:

### ***Jesus' Conclusion: Part One***

In the first instance, he describes two gates and two paths, one of which is small and difficult and one of which is wide and easy (7:13–14). The natural inclination for any person is toward the easy and smooth way, but



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Jesus surprisingly says that this apparently superior way actually leads to destruction. By contrast, the rocky, uneven, pressed-tight way leads to life. What is this narrow and difficult way? It is the way of living that Jesus has just been commending throughout his message — seeking to be whole people rather than merely externally righteous. This is the more difficult way because it requires letting God do a revealing and transforming work not only on our behavior but on our attitudes, the posture of our souls toward God and others, the things we love and hate — in short, in our hearts. This is hard and painful. But this kind of soul work that makes us whole is the only way to find true life and peace.

### ***Jesus' Conclusion: Part Two***

Jesus' second “two-ways” example is longer and adds an element of nuance worth pondering (7:15–22). The big idea is that wise disciples will be discerning about what God values among his people. Our human tendency is to overvalue and honor people whose gifts and powers are flashy and outwardly impressive — described here as prophesying, driving out demons, performing many miracles (7:22). The Apostle Paul addresses the same issue by talking about the potential abuse of other outwardly dynamic gifts such as speaking in tongues, prophesying, healings, words of knowledge without being people of love (1 Cor. 12–14). Shockingly, Jesus shows that in many such cases, the apparently gifted don't truly know God (7:23). They are false prophets (7:15). The difference between a true and false prophet, Jesus is saying, is not in the outward manifestation of flashy powers (we may recall that the magicians of Pharaoh's court were able to mimic some of Moses' divinely-given powers, Exod. 7:8–13). Rather, the true prophet is one whose insides match their outsides, whose behavior comes from a good heart. One could perform seeming miracles in the name of Christianity but inwardly be a wolf rather than a sheep, as they appear (7:15).

In 7:16–20 Jesus repeats a key idea: that you can tell a kind of tree by the kind of fruit it produces. A fig tree produces figs, not apples. A healthy tree produces whole fruit, not diseased fruit or fruitlessness. At first glance this seems to be the opposite of what Jesus is saying in this paragraph! He has just described someone who *looks like* a sheep and does apparently good things but is really a wolf. So how can we tell whether a tree is good or bad by its fruit if wolves can produce a sheepy kind of fruit? Here is where the important nuance comes in. The tree image reminds us that sometimes it takes time to discern what kind of tree someone is and whether that tree is truly healthy. When the plantain and banana plants are growing in the jungle you cannot tell the difference until their different kinds of fruit begin to bud and grow. Both living and dead trees often look the same in the winter. It is only in the spring when one tree begins to flow-

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er that one can tell the difference. So too with people in the world. Sooner or later the true fruit and true healthiness of a person will be revealed. This won't come through more examples of external righteousness — acts of great piety, obedience to the Law, or even miraculous powers. Rather, true disciples can be discerned by looking at heart-level issues. The ways Jesus commends are first issues of the heart — love, mercy, compassion, humility, faithfulness, not being full of lust, greed, envy, hatred, and pride. Sooner or later these character traits, or lack thereof, will be revealed and will reveal what kind of tree someone truly is.

### ***Jesus' Conclusion: Part Three***

The third and final “two-ways” invitation to wisdom is found in 7:24–27. The image Jesus uses to conclude his most famous sermon paints a picture of two different ways people might respond to his message. They can be described with clear and unmistakable terms: the foolish person and the wise one. Both of these people are described as building a house, which clearly represents their lives (see Prov. 8:1, where Wisdom is described as building her house). In light of the consistent wisdom theme throughout the Bible, the end state of these two different kinds of people is no surprise. The foolish person's house is built on sand, and so washes away in a sudden storm flood. By contrast, the wise person's house is built on rock and so, despite great winds and waves, it does not fall.

What does this mean? Jesus explains that the difference between the foolish person and the wise one is about a personal response to him. In both cases, the person hears Jesus' teachings, even as we do now as we read these verses. But the difference between the fool and the wise one is in the response. The fool hears Jesus' words and does nothing about them. The wise one hears Jesus' words and takes them to heart by repenting, turning from one way of seeing and being in the world to the way of the kingdom. In his epistle, James reflects on Jesus' words and describes the fool like a man who looks in a mirror and then goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like (James 1:23–24). This is self-deception (James 1:22). The wise one, on the other hand, hears Jesus' words and does what he says. James describes this man as “the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts.” This person will “be blessed” or flourish (James 1:25). Note that the difference between the two houses can't be discerned by focusing on the outward appearance. Both houses look great. The fundamental difference is in the hidden foundation, or lack thereof.

So what is the mentoring message in 7:13–27?

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The main point of the sermon is an exhortation to be whole, to pursue a righteousness that is more than skin-deep. To drive this point home, Jesus gives us three memorable images: broad and narrow ways, true and false prophets, wise and foolish builders. In each case the issue is the same — the heart within is what matters, not just the outside appearance. The mentored disciple is one who hears Jesus' invitation to live on the more difficult path, the way of heart-level transformation. It is easier to focus on external behavior because this seems more controllable and less invasive. But Jesus makes clear that this is not actually wisdom. This is the broad way that leads to destruction. This is the way of self-promotion by flashy skills and powers that shows one does not really know God. This is the way of the fool, raising walls and roof for a house that will disastrously fall when trials and difficulties and the final judgment comes. The mentored disciple hears these words of Jesus and turns away from the foolish path so that he or she might find a life worth living now and for eternity.

### ***Discussion & Reflection:***

1. What postures of your heart need to be shaped by Jesus to be more in line with his wisdom?
2. How do you grow in having a heart that desires God and his kingdom?



## CONCLUSION

It is not difficult to see why Jesus' Sermon on the Mount has continued to be central to all of Christian understanding and life. Jesus' words are memorable, eye-opening, and challenging. They are at once profound and practical, theological and pastoral.

Try as we might to avoid their penetrating message, anyone who reads the Sermon sincerely will come away with a greater awareness of their brokenness and tendency to live just like the Pharisees — happy to focus on controlling behavior rather than looking at their hearts.

It is indeed difficult to take Jesus' message to heart, despite his clear statement that we must have this whole-person righteousness or we will show ourselves *not* to be part of his coming kingdom, *not* on the path that leads to life, *not* the wise person whose house stands in the judgment. It is difficult because even the most godly and mature people, if they are honest, will still see plenty of moments of lust, coveting, greed, envy, resentment, anxiety, love for money, desire for the praise of others, and impure motives in their hearts. What do we do when we look inside and see that our hearts rarely if ever match our behavior? Does this mean no one will be saved?

The answer to this crucial question comes from taking the Gospel of Matthew as a whole. We are reminded that Jesus came into the world to save his people from their sins (1:21) by dying on our behalf and making a new covenant between God and humanity that is based on Jesus' atoning sacrifice (26:27–29). Jesus continually looks upon us with compassion (9:36). God is our Father and gladly gives to us. We must simply ask (7:7–11). And we return to the powerful words from Jesus himself from 11:28, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

Whenever we are learning any skill — driving a car, playing golf, learning a

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language, etc. — we stumble and misstep and struggle. So too with learning to follow Jesus. Jesus' original disciples and every disciple in every place for the last 2000 years has stumbled, struggled, and often failed. This is what honest mentorship looks like. With the kindness and goodness of God in mind, we can confidently and imperfectly receive Jesus' invitation to "take my yoke upon you and learn from, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (11:29).



## ENDNOTES

1. For a fuller explanation of the Sermon on the Mount, see Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Baker Academic, 2017).



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