

Last week, we looked at the first of three chapters that make up the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel. This section, chapters 5-7, is the first of five discourses intended to mirror the five books of Moses referred to as Torah. Moreover, this first chapter consisted mostly of Jesus interpreting the law in a way that significantly changed more traditional perspectives, as they would have been available in collections of writings dating back for centuries. Also significant to point out here is that Jesus interprets the law on the basis of his own authority to do so. In other words, there is no authority higher than that of the Son of God and this claim of authority would not have been lost on the disciples who heard him speak. This was not only a witness to the meaning of the law. It was also a witness to Jesus himself as the Messiah—the Son of God—above whom there are no authorities.

Before going into chapter 6, I want to share something about the basis upon which Jesus would have understood obedience to the law. And by the way, "the law" here means the way Jesus interpreted what it meant. This is not the law as the other religious authorities understood it. It is the law as the Son of God understands it.

For the Jews at that time, obedience to the law was a matter of being faithful to the covenant God made with their ancestors through Moses on Mt. Sinai. God had chosen them to be his people way back when he gave his promise to Abraham. Through Moses, God gave the descendents of Abraham the law which was to serve as the basis of their covenant relationship. By observing the law, the people would become a holy people, and God would thereby bless them and keep them safe from their enemies. Therefore, the law was a blueprint whereby the people could become God's people, holy and righteous, living before him as a reflection of God's presence in their community. Thus, to be the people of God required more than simply being born of Jewish parents. To be God's people required them to live according to God's blueprint for their lives.

Throughout their history therefore, whenever they fell to the temptation to adopt the ways and/or the gods of other people, God sent prophets to call them to account. The job of a prophet was to speak the word of God to the people whenever they became disobedient in some way. And this included not only personal morality. It also included how they structured their society. Should the poor among them be ignored, or should the legal authorities enforce laws that led to injustice, the prophets, warned them of God's impending judgment. They were to be holy as individuals and holy as a people. Otherwise, in what sense could they ever be considered to be God's people? To obey the law was to be righteous, and to be righteous was to have a right relationship with the God who chose them to be God's people.

For Jesus, there was something more important at stake when it came to the question of how a people became God's people. God's people are indeed a people who become so identified because God chose them. No one can choose to become a member of God's special people. This is a matter solely of divine initiative. In fact, the other way around would be impossible because, in order to become God's people, we have to know who God is.

God, being entirely inaccessible to human investigation, striving, insight, or any other mode of gaining knowledge of something, is completely out of reach. We can't even discern whether or not he exists with any degree of certainty. Therefore, to become God's people, God needs to condescend to us in some way we can understand and thereby make himself known to us.

For Christians, God makes himself known in Jesus and by the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit. Externally, God comes to us a human being whose ministry, death, and resurrection define who God is for us. That is, for us God is love: the God who takes on weak human nature, calls, forgives, and loves sinner, and then lays down his life, as a person may die so that another may escape punishment and therefore death as well. The definition of God, as God discloses himself in Jesus Christ, is love for others.

Moreover, since Jesus also overcomes death in himself and rises again to the Father in glory, he sends the Divine Spirit to bring his life and love to us. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of love that not only lives in our hearts but also works in us to free us from sin and conform us to the image of Christ who alone is righteous before God. And so, while obedience to the covenant law insures the righteousness of the people before God, and thereby gives them their identity as God's people, for Jesus, and his "new covenant," it's the love of God, revealed in Jesus Christ and made an effective force for change in the gift of the Holy Spirit (whose being is love) that makes people God's people. The basis of the covenant is the love of God, and this divine love cleanses us from sin and frees us to love our neighbors for their own sakes, not for what we will get out of it.

This puts the law in a whole new perspective. Now, the law is not a means to an end. It is not the instrument whereby God makes us holy and righteous. Rather, now that the power of love does that, the law must be understood as a way in which we express our love for God. We are to obey the law, not because it makes us holy, but because the things the law demands are expressions of the way in which we can love God and our neighbor.

Moreover, understood in this way, the law will no longer be a burden or something that requires us to struggle with ourselves. Our hearts, already given the gift of divine love, will not be driven to do things that violate that love, or be tempted to love other things more. When we love someone, we desire to do the things that express that love. It is a delight to do so. Moreover, since the primary law is to love God and our neighbor as ourselves, the law will actually become, not a prescription to gain something, but the very thing we joyfully do—freely, and with no compunction or purpose of evasion.

Love and happiness go hand in hand. When we love something, we don't do so in order to get something else. The object of love is itself the source of our happiness. God is the highest good by definition, and is therefore also the ultimate source of happiness. Internally, the Holy Spirit is experienced as communion with the love of God, and the power through which we experience new birth—not once, but many times as we go through life. And this, in turn, makes obedience to God a thing of delight and ultimate fulfillment of our heart's desire.

In chapter 6, Jesus discusses the ways in which we can engage in practices that open ourselves up to the love of God in the Spirit. While we don't and can never control the movements of the Spirit in our hearts any more than we can command the wind where to blow, and while there is simply no way to understand why and when the Spirit may do what it does, and while there will even be times when we wonder whether the Spirit has been taken away, nevertheless, there are ways we can open ourselves up to the Spirit and make ourselves available to the Spirit while at the same time asking for the Spirit to come. In fact, one of the oldest prayers in Christianity is "Come Holy Spirit, Come." Another is "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner." I can safely say that the Spirit is often most likely to respond during times of repentance. When we honestly acknowledge not sin in general (sin in general is an idea, not a real sin) but a real sin we have committed, particularly one to which our hearts are prone, and ask for forgiveness with the intent of reform, the Holy Spirit likes this because this—freeing people from sin—is what the Holy Spirit does. Remember what Peter told the crowds at Pentecost when they asked, "What must we do to be saved?" "Repent, and turn to the Lord Jesus Christ." It's the Spirit that brings the power of Jesus' salvation into our hearts so that they can be freed from sin and restored to wholeness.

Apart from this (in Chapter 6) Jesus turns to the topic of spiritual discipline. For the Jews, there were three basic spiritual practices that people believed would bring them close to God: alms giving, prayer, and fasting. These practices were ancient and commonly practiced by all people who took their relationship with God seriously. Jesus teaches the right way to do these things by comparing it with the wrong way--the way "the hypocrites" do it. Moreover, he wants to teach them in terms of their purpose and what doing these things will result in.

So his opening statement is a warning. Don't engage in these things for the wrong reason. If you do, nothing good will come of it.

First, he speaks of alms giving. The "hypocrites," by which he means all those who want to be known as especially spiritual people by others, give their alms in such a way that others can see just how generous and caring they are. Alms were deposited in the public treasury located out in the open on the temple grounds. If a person desired to be seen in this regard, he could easily make a big deal about how much his deposit was. That way, everyone within sight could see and be duly impressed by his generosity. However, apart from the fact that the people who did this were usually very well off from a financial point of view, it was clear to anyone with any degree of insight that their motives were not concern for the poor. Their motives were the applause and recognition of the crowd. They wanted to be admired by others. And that's what they probably got. In other words, they received their reward.

But what is this? If it's not love for neighbor, what is it? Clearly, this is self-love. And this is the underlying problem with all religious laws and acts of piety. If we don't do them out of love for God and our neighbor, if we do them in order to receive a benefit for ourselves, then we do them out of self-love. And while our self-love may in fact be rewarded, what we won't receive is God's love.

Spiritual practices are for the purpose of opening us up to receive God's love into our hearts. They are not done so that we can earn God's love, for God already loves us. They are a way of disengaging from another potential object of love so as to make room for God's love in its place. And, for the more spiritually mature, they are a way of showing our love for God in what we do, not just in what we say.

Jesus then turns to the practice of prayer. Some folks like to stand in public and heap one phrase on another for an interminably long time so that they look as if they are particularly spiritual. This is common in our own day. Preachers and others who are asked to offer a public prayer will often go on and on adding the word "just" over and over again until you "just" want them to shut up. This is clearly an attempt to sound particularly spiritual—not before God, but before those who can hear. Some are impressed by this verbal overkill. However, I believe God is bored with it. But worse, they have received their reward, and it didn't come from God.

That God desires us to be short, to the point, and to pray in a way that reflects our desire for his will and the things he wants to give is illustrated in Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer. And this is the long version! We regard God as a loving Father, not an angry judge or a being so removed from us that we can't even address him with a word of endearment. First of all, we desire his rule of love in our lives (God's Kingdom), and that his will, not ours, be done. Daily bread is enough for those who trust him, and we need his grace for forgiveness and freedom from evil. This prayer truly illustrates a person who delights in God and in God's will.

Finally, he turns to fasting. Here too the "hypocrites" whose public faces hide self-centered motives, pretend to be suffering all manner of hunger pains. "Look at how I'm willing to suffer for God!" But they're not. They are suffering—if at all—for the sake of the approval of the crowd. Since these people already have the reward they seek, what then are they missing out on? Jesus counsels us to do these things in secret, where no one can even know we are doing them. What kind of reward can this lead to, aside from loneliness?

Very simply, the greatest reward of all. For when we do these things in the privacy of our own space, we are not in fact alone. We are with God. And only God can give a divine reward, a lasting treasure that is of such value that everything else pales in comparison. The reward is the Holy Spirit, and this reward brings life, love, strength, hope, guidance, and joy.

The purpose of spiritual disciplines, which includes worship and serving the mission of the church, is to come into union with Christ. He brings heaven to earth. He fills our hearts with love. He brings a joy that is everlasting. He is the one and only that is everlasting. He is the one and only ultimate treasure of our lives. Everything else has a termination date. It ends and thereby leaves gaping holes in our hearts and minds. Human beings were made for fellowship with the God who is love, and therefore salvation can come from nowhere else.

Jesus then turns to the subject of treasures, those things we all seek in one way or another. Everyone has treasures. In fact, the love of that which becomes our treasure because we are convinced it will make us happy and fulfilled...this defines what our treasure is. If our

treasure is an object from the world of things, a world that is passing away, then rust, moth, or thieves will rob us of it and leave us desolate. If our treasure is Christ, we will have everlasting joy and life for he will never pass away. Again, we are speaking of matters of the heart, for it is the heart that loves.

The next short observation Jesus makes pertains to what we might call our inner eye. We have physical eyes to see the external world. But we also have an inner eye that keeps its gaze on our hearts. Suppose my heart is consumed by the desire for the acceptance of others. If so, my inner eye will focus like that of an eagle on those things within me that I believe I need to acquire this reward. It will be ever diligent in seeing to it that I say the right things, have the proper attitudes, and come across as a person deserving of recognition.

Or, suppose I derive my self-esteem from the things I have. My inner eye will be focused on and calculating what I need to feel good about myself. The same is true in terms of physical appearance, intelligence, athletic prowess, etc., etc.

If this is the case, our souls will be filled with the darkness of a lie. For none of these things can give us love, truth, or everlasting joy. Rather, they will blind us to what is the real source of what we seek. The truth will be entirely eclipsed, leaving our souls blind.

And by the way, you can't serve God in a half-hearted way. His love is all-consuming. Should we try, we will end up resenting God for not letting us hang onto whatever else lives in our hearts.

Chapter 6 closes with Jesus' observations about anxiety. We do indeed need food, clothing, and other necessities. So do the creatures of the earth and the plants of the field. But they seem content to seek what they need one thing at a time. Why can't we be like they are? Why do we always have to live in a state of fear that tomorrow will become disastrous? Do we believe that God loves us? If so, will he not provide?

But more than this, life is much more than bodily needs. When our bodies die, what then? An eternal nothingness? In the scheme of things, what is of more importance? Our next meal or our eternal destiny? We tend to have this confused. Because we need our bodily needs addressed now, the future seems less important. But what if the future Kingdom of God were available in a partial way now? What if we could live in God's love and the everlasting life now?

In these words of assurance, Jesus promises us that God's kingdom—communion with God through the gift of the Spirit—is available to us now. Therefore, lest we lose out while seeking those things God already knows we need, seek first his kingdom. All these other things will continue to be there in any case.

*Thus endeth Chapter 6*