

The Sermon on the Mount (concluded)

As you look at Matthew 6:19-24, you will notice the frequent use of poetic parallelism. For example:

Do not lay up treasure on earth / do lay up treasure in heaven.

On earth, moth and rust destroy / in heaven, they are not destroyed.

There are also many choices presented. That is a pattern that Matthew uses because Jesus used it. We have here two opposing forces. Thus Jesus tells you to store your treasure in heaven, not on earth. He asks if your life is characterized by light or by darkness. Are you going to serve God or mammon? Two opposing choices, two ways of life, are presented repeatedly. The one way of life is storing things on earth, having an eye that is evil and serving mammon. The other way of life is storing in heaven, having an eye that's full of light and serving God. That is the opposite way.

Another feature of this passage is that it begins with a command, "Do not store treasures on earth." A little later we get another command: "Do store them in heaven." But after that, the commands disappear. This passage feels to many readers as if it is highly imperative, full of commands and heavily emphasizing the law. "Go do these things and don't do those things."

But it isn't that sort of passage. A disciple understands that he is supposed to serve God and not mammon. But the Sermon on the Mount is also for unbelievers to listen in, and to evaluate whether they want to be disciples. Are they willing to pay the price of being a disciple? There are a lot of people in this world who would hear that you can't serve God and mammon and they would say, "Really? Why not? You mean I can't serve God and my career simultaneously? Doesn't God bless us when we become Christians so that we will get richer than ever?" So Jesus' words would be shocking to some people—maybe not to a believer though even he might resist it for awhile. In such cases this passage will sound like it is mostly a command when it is not.

Another question is whether we should look at this passage and what follows as a diagnosis or as a preventative. In Matthew 6:19-21 there is a basic command and then a saying about the eye being the lamp of the body. This could mean that if you find yourself idolizing your treasures on earth, the reason is that your eyes are bad. Your only hope is to recognize that your eyes are bad, that you are in great darkness, and throw yourself on God's mercy.

Or the passage could be warning hearers that their eyes are like a lamp so that, if you spend all your time looking at catalogs, reading sports magazines, or window shopping and making a list of all you want, then your whole life will be affected. That sort of obsession with shallow things is going to be like a light or a window that is blocked. What you keep looking at is going to affect the whole person. That's the question. Is it A or B? Diagnosis or preventative? In this rare case one does not need to choose between the two options. They are both true. The "eye" and the "heart" are almost interchangeable terms in the Old Testament (see Psalm 119, for example). If you set your eye on the command then you also set your heart on the command. If you love God and His truth with your eye, you love it with your heart.

So this passage is addressing the attitude of one's heart. Jesus is always pushing people to diagnose the condition of their hearts. Jesus tells people to look at their character, to diagnose themselves. He tells people that they are sinners, that they are poor, and that they should mourn. Matthew 5 is full of this, telling hearers to not just be content with doing the right thing, but to look at the heart. What He says about loving enemies, for example, boils down to the diagnostic question, "Are you hating people inside?"

Matthew 6:19-24 looks like diagnosis too. Jesus seems to be asking, “If your whole focus is on this world, don’t just be superficial about it, ask the question why. What if it’s because there’s something wrong with your eye? You’re full of darkness.” Verse 22 sounds so much like an analysis of the soul. That is partly correct. Jesus is talking about diagnosis. If you find yourself doing the wrong thing, don’t just say to yourself, “I’m going to try harder and do better. I’m going to stop storing up treasures on earth and I’m going to start storing up in heaven.” If you have no God, if you are not a redeemed person, a new person, you cannot do that. It is not in you.

The reason is very simple: If you don’t know that God is your Father and God loves you, it makes all the sense in the world to store up treasures on earth. If you don’t believe in God, it’s suicide to give your possessions away. You had better keep them for yourself because they are all you have and everything in life is entirely up to you. You have to take care of yourself. The unregenerate person must, if they have any sense at all, store up treasures on earth. The fact that these treasures are liable to destruction simply means they must get some spray to kill the moths and get a security system to keep the robbers out.

Simply giving people new rules to live by is not enough to get them to change. You must get to the root of the matter where there’s darkness within. On the other hand, it is also true that what we do changes who we are. If you tell a lie once it is easier to tell one the next time you are tempted, and if you tell a lie three times it will be still easier. It is even easier the tenth time. Eventually you will become a liar. It is also true that if you are generous once and you give sacrificially once, it may be almost impossible for you. It may practically kill you to give somebody ten dollars when you know you won’t get it back, or to loan fifty dollars. If you loan out your car you may find yourself grieving and grieving until you get it back four hours later. Letting someone borrow it may cause you to worry like crazy. But the second time may be easier and, if you do it again and again, you just may become a generous person. It is possible to change in that way.

Another aspect of this passage that readers should consider is not obvious in the English translation. Jesus uses very specific words to warn us about where we set our eye. Specifically, when Jesus says, “if your eye is bad,” the word for bad is actually “evil.” What we have here is a reference to an evil eye—one of the oldest idioms in the human race. The phrase “evil eye” is undoubtedly at least three thousand years old, and it may be older than three thousand years. The evil eye means a curse.

To understand what Jesus means by referring to the “evil eye” you have to address the question, “Why do people curse other people?” Historically, the answer was that they cursed from envy. Someone would get angry that another person had something that he wanted or felt he should have. This could be a person who married the spouse that the other wanted, or it could be caused by someone successfully stealing a cow. As a result of such anger someone would “give” the offender the “evil eye.” The evil eye was the greedy eye—the eye that didn’t have enough, the eye that wasn’t satisfied. The evil eye always wanted more. It was jealous and grudging about another person’s happiness. In the literature from the historical period between the end of the Old Testament and the events in the New Testament we have references to this. The Book of Ecclesiasticus (not Ecclesiastes) talks a couple of times about the evil eye (14:10; 34:13). Moses uses the term in Deuteronomy 15:9 and Jesus uses it a few other times (Matthew 20:15; Luke 11:34).

The word Jesus uses for a good eye is also an unusual word. The word is a “simple eye,” or it can be translated a “pure eye,” or a “generous eye.” This translation issue is also present in Romans 12:8 where the phrase, “those who give should give generously,” actually says to “give simply.” To give simply means to give without strings attached. To give simply means, “It is just a gift, you can have it, it is

yours, and I do not want any form of repayment. You don't owe me anything because of what you have received." Giving simply is not easy to do but it is good to do. Jesus wants us to have a simple eye, an eye that just gives without expectation. Jesus is using the words "evil eye" and "simple eye" to remind us that it is important where we set our eye as we live our lives out. We must not set them on consumer magazines and other superficial materialistic concerns.

Jesus goes on to tell us that if we get these matters straight in our minds we will realize that we cannot serve two masters. We are confronted with a choice. You can't serve both God and mammon. Then He goes on to describe a little bit more what a right attitude toward wealth might mean. Above all what it means is that we should not only be generous on a "physical level," but should also be generous in our minds. Generosity in our minds is expressed by a love of God, free from worry (6:25-34). If you are truly a disciple, you don't need to worry about your life. Jesus gives a series of reasons to prove it. Life is more important than food in your body and more important than clothing. Don't worry, because God takes care of birds and you are more important than birds. God will take care of you.

Thus, the reason to refuse to worry comes from faith. You must believe that God is your father and is taking care of you. Jesus gives an additional argument by asking the question, "What can worry accomplish?" (6:27). What can you do by worrying? Can you add an hour to your life by worrying? Does it help? Not at all.

Then Jesus adds another argument (6:28). Can you learn the lesson of the wild flower? See how God takes care of His creation. He clothed His creation. He clothed weeds and wild grasses in flowers. He makes wild things bloom with beauty. If He makes them beautiful, won't He give you enough? He even makes some beautiful clothes for plants. Won't He clothe you? You're so much more important to Him than the grass!

Then Jesus says that if you live your life in worry, you're basically living like a pagan (6:31). Pagans run back and forth saying, "What shall we eat, what shall we drink, what shall we wear?" Pagans run after these things because they don't believe God will provide them. They're going to take care of them for themselves. They always feel they had better get busy. That's why pagans don't observe the Sabbath Day, because they know that if it doesn't get done in six days, God won't do it for them. They have got to do it themselves. They run and don't stop.

Jesus is asking, "Are you like that?" In other words, "Are you a practical atheist?" That is the question. Do you really believe that God knows that you need these things? Jesus summarizes in verse 33 by saying that a believer needs to seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness. Obedience starts with theism, with God Himself. Jesus' promise, "then all these things will be added to you," means that God will add them—you cannot add them to yourself. Thus, Jesus is not encouraging you to have the right attitude towards possessions in some general sense, but to have the right attitude towards possessions because you believe in God, because you are a Christian, a disciple.

Matthew 7

At this point the great central portion of the Sermon of the Mount is now behind us. Readers have here a sample of Christ's righteousness and kingdom righteousness. When someone is done listening to the Sermon of the Mount he faces the temptation that a husband or wife often faces after going to a marriage seminar without the spouse. What can easily happen is that the husband, for example, returns from the seminar, and begins making demands of the wife: "The speaker gave a great talk and said that you should stop nagging me and bossing me around. You should start being more sensitive." The husband

uses everything the speaker said as a way of manipulating, controlling, or changing his wife by making her feel guilty. It is quite possible to talk about all the things your spouse should do and to forget about the things *you* should be doing differently. Jesus deals with this type of attitude in Matthew 7:1-6.

After listening to Jesus' sermon, you will be tempted to judge others. You will be tempted to resist this new instruction, to not examine your own soul, to not examine your own commitment or your dedication, but rather to judge others. Matthew 7 doesn't really have much new material in it. Rather, Matthew 7 asks how are *you* going to respond to what you've just heard. Thus, Jesus says, right away, don't use this instruction to judge. Rather, you should apply it to yourself (Matthew 7:1-6). Then He encourages you to pursue God for His blessing so you can do these things He commands (Matthew 7:7-12). Finally, He lays out choices. Which way will you go? Will you obey My words and bear fruit or not (Matthew 7:13-20)?

Another way of getting at the question of how to understand Matthew 7 is by simply asking how a reader might feel after receiving all this instruction. Both the Christian or the non-Christian might feel overwhelmed. While everything Jesus commands is obviously right and good, it is too much—the reader can't possibly do them. From a theological perspective, where is grace in this? A reader could understandably complain, "All I have heard is law, law, and more law." There is no question that there are many commands here. Even the beatitudes end with a call for action. They don't say to just hunger and thirst for righteousness, but to let your righteous deeds shine so that God is praised. Then the sermon goes on to say we must do the right thing and do it all for the right reasons. Where is grace?

Grace appears at the start. Grace is in the Sermon on the Mount from the beginning. "Blessed are the poor in spirit." If, after hearing Matthew 5 and 6, a reader feels overwhelmed so that he asks the question, "Where is grace in all this?" then he has gotten the point, the point that Jesus made in the very first beatitude.

The second answer to the question, "Where is grace in all this," is found in Matthew 7:7, "Ask and it will be given to you." There is no question as to who will give the grace. Jesus is speaking in the common style of the Judaism of His day in order to avoid the excessive use of the name of God, which was offensive to some Jews. "Ask and it will be given to you"...by God. "Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you"...by God. That is the promise He makes so that, when you see your inability to obey, you ask God. What you should not do is use this information to judge people. If you use this knowledge about the righteous life to judge others you have simply shown that you know the standards. And if you know the standards but don't keep them then you have condemned yourself. For example, if you hate it when people come late to your meetings, that means you know that it is rude to come late. If you yourself come late to somebody else's meeting, you have condemned yourself by your anger at other tardy people. So don't use your knowledge of the proper rules of behavior to judge others.

What you must do instead is take a good hard look at yourself. See the plank in your eye. Take the speck out of your own eye. Then you will be able to see clearly for others. Jesus is saying, "Be hard on yourself first. After you practice this command yourself, then you may have a few ideas about how others should behave and offer them good counsel."

Matthew 6:6 provides a great challenge here. "Don't give dogs what is sacred and do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet and then turn and tear you to pieces." This verse is a problem because the verses leading up to it (Matt. 7:1-5) say to not judge. Does verse 6 mean we must determine who is a pig and who is a dog and how to treat them accordingly? This would mean that we have to judge.

There are two possibilities regarding Jesus' intended meaning. One possibility is that He is saying, "I told you not to judge, but sometimes you have to do so." If this is Jesus' meaning, then Matthew 7:1-6 is similar to Proverbs 26:4, 5 which says, "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes." The proverb is saying that the reader must figure out which one applies. So while verses 1-5 basically teach us to not judge, maybe Jesus was saying in verse 6 that sometimes you need to judge. When you need to judge, there are times when you don't want to cast your pearls before swine.

A more convincing explanation for verse 6 is that it is best described as instructive irony. Irony means saying something with a certain tone of voice, or in a certain setting, and meaning the exact opposite of your literal words. It is likely that Jesus is using instructive irony here for several reasons. First, Jesus uses instructive irony elsewhere in His speech. For example, He says to the Pharisees, "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." At face value this means Jesus is not calling the Pharisees to repentance because they are righteous. But Jesus does not really believe that they don't need to repent. He is using instructive irony with them, as He uses it elsewhere.

Second, the words, "pigs" and "dogs" were extremely harsh language. To determine that someone is a pig or a dog and is not even worthy of a word from you is to make an extremely harsh judgment. You would be saying, "You don't have the truth, but you're such a pig, you're such a dog, that I'm not even going to bother to talk to you, because you wouldn't understand it anyway." That's harsh, judgmental language.

Furthermore, Jesus' words, if taken literally, run counter to the teaching that we should evangelize and make disciples of mankind. There have been many unlikely people—the sort of person that, if anyone could be compared to a pig or dog, he would be the one—who in fact then become Christians later on. We dare not judge that someone is a pig or a dog, and then hide the truth from them. Undoubtedly, some people would have judged Saul of Tarsus, who later became Paul the apostle, as being in this category. Judging someone in this way runs contrary to Jesus' own practice because He spent time with people that could have been judged pigs and dogs—prostitutes, tax collectors, and various others.

Jesus is using irony to show us exactly how foolish it is to judge. He is saying, "If you take this wisdom that I've given you and you regard it as some sacred thing to people who aren't worthy of it so that you act like you are tossing your pearls of wisdom to people you consider dogs and pigs, they will pick up your attitude and will turn on you and destroy you." Don't use the Word of God to despise another person. Don't give people the impression you are saying, "Look at what I know, you pig. Look at what I know, you dog. I'm so far ahead of you." Instead of having an attitude like that, you should ask, seek, knock, and plead. You should beg God to show you the right way.

Finally when Jesus is done establishing the right way to look at His law, He tells His audience there is a turning point in front of them. There is a decision to be made. As you receive all of this teaching, there are two roads, an easy road and a hard road. Which road do you take (Matt. 7:13-14)? You can say that your life is a tree (Matt. 7:15-20). You can bear fruit by loving and trusting God, or you can have a life, a tree, that bears nothing but bad fruit as years go by. Which kind of tree are you?

The question can also be asked, "Are you going to listen to all this now, and really do it (7:21-23)?" You may say, "Yes, I believe in God, I believe in Christ; I'm a Christian." But be careful! There are two ways to confess Christ. Some people who confess Christ and say, "Oh, Lord, I cast out demons in Your name, I believe in You, I trust in You," will hear Jesus say, "I never knew you. You said the words and

did the deeds, but I never knew you.” Is that who you are? When you say, “Jesus is my Lord,” do you know what that means? What kind of confession do you make?

There are also two kinds of builder. “On what do you build?” Jesus asks (Matt 7:24). Are you building on sand? It is tempting to do so, just like buying cheap land is tempting. It is like land that can be flooded. In Jesus’ illustration, the sand that you build on is probably sandy land in a dry riverbed. Are you going to buy flood land because it is so inexpensive and then build a house there? The problem with saving the money on cheap land is that floods come. When the flood comes, what is your house built on? Is your house built on the rock?

Notice it does not say, in the original language, that the house has its foundation on *a* rock, it says in verse 25, *the* rock. This prepares us for the time, a few chapters later, when Peter confesses Christ. There we hear of this rock, the rock of Peter’s confession: Christ. Christ is the rock and confessing Peter is also the foundation of the church. That’s the rock on which you stand. The reader of the Sermon on the Mount is confronted with the question, which is your path? What kind of person are you?

A few years ago my family went to the beach in New Jersey. We got there about nine o’clock at night and we had been traveling a long time. I was the main driver. It was raining, but somehow I was so excited that I just had to go to the beach. Perhaps it was because we hadn’t been to the beach for two years. My wife and my kids all decided it was too late and they were too tired. They went to bed.

I went to the beach. By the time I got there it was 9:30. It was July 1 that night, or close to it, so the sky was not entirely black at the edge of the horizon. Of course, the waves were almost black and the skies were almost black. I could barely see the edge of the waves, but I could hear them roaring because there was a lot of wind that night. Although my vision was not quite clear in the darkness, seeing the waves surge gave me a sense of the vastness of the ocean and the vastness of the sky. When you see that sort of thing, it is exciting and awesome because you feel the vastness of creation. It is also terrifying. You are so small! I walked and ran through the waves and through the wind for about half an hour.

Then I realized I hadn’t seen one person. Four hundred yards away I could see the boardwalk, where people were eating pizza and french fries and snow cones and playing mini-golf. I wondered why there were hundreds of people on the boardwalk but so few in the wild grandeur, the wild and wonderful experience of the beach. It was the better road, but it was the narrow road. Pizza is not frightening. Video games are not terrifying. That was why most people preferred the boardwalk. It was safe but superficial.

God asks us to choose the dangerous road, the awesome road, the overpowering road, the road that makes us feel how little we are. It is much more dangerous but it is much better.