

JOURNEY WITH JESUS

A. THE PIONEER.

8. Lessons for Living.

Matthew chapters 5-7. These chapters record Jesus' famous "Sermon on the Mount". **Luke 6:20-49** records a similar sermon which Jesus delivered "on a level place": no doubt as the perfect teacher, Jesus knew he had to repeat important issues so that people could remember them. In any case, it seems to have occurred soon after Jesus chose his 12 apostles, although it should be remembered that the Hebrew writers were not much concerned with chronology and were more likely to organise their works into groups of subjects rather than work on a timeline. It is possible that this is a collection of sermons preached at different times. Chronology in the Scriptures is not so important as the message behind the story.

Jesus was still based in Capernaum and he could have preached this sermon on the gently sloping hillside at the northwest corner of Lake Galilee. His healing ministry had attracted crowds from far beyond Galilee – Jerusalem, Judea, the Decapolis (ten cities east of the Jordan River) and even Syria. (**Matthew 4:24,25.**) **Luke 6:17** adds Tyre and Sidon to the list. Jesus knew that those who sought to be his disciples needed much teaching and so he withdrew from the miracle-seeking crowds and addressed himself to those who were earnestly seeking after God. This sermon was not a case of Jesus setting out rules for us to keep in order to get to Heaven: it was rather that, having by his grace become his disciples, we should by that same grace live our lives by his rules.

Some people declare that they are Christians by virtue of the fact that they keep the Ten Commandments, or the Golden Rule or the whole Sermon on the Mount. That is ridiculous – even the most saintly Christian fails now and then to keep the impossibly high standards that Jesus laid down for us there ! We can only do it by his Spirit living and working within us: we must be "born again" first to the new life in Christ, who will enable us to live the superabundant life he has planned for us. We are not good so that we can get to Heaven – we are good because, by his grace alone, we are already on the way to Heaven!

It is interesting that Jesus delivered his new law from a mountain: it was on a mountain that Moses received God's law and passed it on to the people of Israel. And notice, in **verses 3-12**, that he doesn't start by giving orders, but by pronouncing blessings! In other words, we start with grace – grace that provides the basis for working out the keeping of the law. The word "blessed" in the Greek is "makarios", a special word meaning a divine and godlike joy. The Greeks used this word of Cyprus because they believed that Cyprus was so lovely, so rich and fertile that one would never need to go beyond its coastline to find the perfectly happy life. "Makarios" then describes that joy which has its secret within itself, that joy which is serene and untouchable, self-contained, independent of the circumstances of life. And it is that joy, Jesus said, which is ours in him!

In **verse 3** the Greek word for "poor" signifies total poverty, dependent entirely on another's support: we have to recognise our position before God in order to come into the kingdom of Heaven. Poverty and disease are bad enough, but utter wretchedness comes with one's awareness of sin and need for forgiveness. The New English Bible translates this verse, "How blest are those who know their need of God."

Verse 4 The word for "mourn" here is the strongest word for mourning in the Greek language. Christianity begins with a sense of sin. Blessed is the man/woman who is intensely sorry for his sin, the man/woman who is heart-broken for what his sin has done to God and to Jesus Christ, who paid its price on the Cross.

Verse 5 The word "meek" is taken from **Psalms 37:11** and does not mean someone who is weak and downtrodden by men, but one whose attitude is one of humility and meekness before God.

Verse 6 To understand this verse we need to put ourselves back into that time in Palestine, when a working man would eat meat only once a week, and would never be far from the border-line of real

hunger and actual starvation. Nor could he just turn on a tap to slake his thirst: if he was in the middle of a journey when a sand-storm began to blow, all he could do would be to wrap his head in his cloak, turn his back to the wind and wait with parched and burning throat until it passed. The hunger and thirst of which Jesus spoke could not be appeased with a snack of biscuits and coffee: it was the difference between life and death, as if Jesus was saying, “How much do you want righteousness? How intense is your desire for goodness?”

Verse 7 God spoke of His forgiveness to Moses back in **Exodus 34:7**. Free forgiveness sets Christianity above every other religion: *love* is its base and essence. But this forgiveness received by us, must be shown to others: as Christ reached out to us, we must reach out to others in their need.

Verse 8 In **Psalms 86:11** David prays, “Give me an undivided heart”, and that is the same word as used here, “the pure in heart.” **Jeremiah 32:39** and **Ezekiel 11:19** both speak of an “undivided heart”: our worship and service for God must be with singleness of heart and purpose, with no mixed motives. This is quite impossible without the infilling of the Holy Spirit!

Verse 9 Notice the word is *peace-makers*, not merely peace-lovers or peace-keepers. It is an active word, denoting someone who works positively to create peace between man and God, and between man and man. “Peace at any price” is a dangerous motto for families or nations. To spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ is to work for the highest peace.

Verses 10-12 Jesus never hid the fact that following Him would bring persecution. The first Christians faced disruption to their domestic, social and work life, slander, political ostracism, imprisonment, torture and even death: in short, they trod the path their Master had trodden for them. But notice the words, “great is your reward *in heaven*”, which do not merely mean “after death”, but rather, “with God.” In other words, God Himself is with us in a special way in the here and now, whatever suffering we endure for His sake.

The first 4 of these “beatitudes” concern our relationship to God, the second 4 concern our relationship with our fellowmen. We must get the first 4 right before we can hope to put the second 4 into practice. The last beatitude switches into the passive mode – how we react to outside pressures. But note that in all facets of life, we can experience the blessing of God which transforms them all!

Verses 13-16. In the ancient world salt was highly valued, regarded as the purest of all substances. The impure salt dug from the shores of the Dead Sea could gradually become unsalty as the actual sodium chloride dissolved: in that case it would be thrown out and used as a base for roads – “trampled by men”, as Jesus said. It was also the commonest of all preservatives, used to keep things from decaying; a lump of meat treated with salt would maintain its freshness, like a new soul inserted into a dead body. To be effective, salt must be poured out of the saltcellar and into the food, it must keep its original state, distinct from the food it is enhancing. Salt also adds taste: you only need a little to transform a bland dish into something quite delicious. So it is a challenge to us when Jesus refers to us as “the salt of the earth”! As his followers we must keep ourselves pure, ready to “stop the rot” around us and add the “flavour” of his love and grace in our own lives and in those around us. St Paul expresses a similar thought in **2 Corinthians 2:14,15**, when he talks of Christians spreading “the fragrance of the knowledge of Him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.”

Light, like salt, affects its environment by being distinctive. You only need a little light to make a big difference in a darkened room. No doubt Jesus was thinking of Jerusalem when he talked of the city on a hill: the city that should have been a light to the world if she had truly kept God’s law. Note he did not say “You are the light of the Church:” our work is not to gain a good standing among our fellow-Christians, but to go out into the darkened world and make Christ visible. And we can only do that as Christ himself sets us alight, he who truly is the Light of the world. His words “your Father in Heaven” reflects a major emphasis in his teaching. Up to this time the Jews thought of God generally

as the Father of Israel, whereas Jesus made the point strongly that He is the Father of us all, as individuals. He came to earth to show us the Father.

Jesus declared that as his disciples, we are both salt and light. Are we still in the salt cellar, or are we out in the world doing our bit to halt the bad things of life and flavour the good things? Are we too shy to hold up our light so that all may see the Jesus whom we follow?

Chapter 5:17-20 The Eternal Law. Jesus here is talking about the Law given to Israel by God, and not the petty oral laws that had accumulated over the centuries and had come to bear a wrongful importance to the religious leaders. Jesus had already broken several of those – he had healed on the Sabbath, he had touched a leper, he had eaten with “sinners”: these were man-made stipulations that in no way arose from a genuine love of God. That is why he said so often in this sermon, “You have *heard* that it was *said*....” (i.e. by the scribes whose man-made laws handed down by word of mouth had no validity in the sight of God) and then proceeded to give them laws that could only be fulfilled by hearts yielded to the love of God. Jesus himself was very careful to obey the written commands given by God to Moses during his ministry, and as for the Prophets, far from abolishing them, he was their ultimate fulfilment! In giving the Ten Commandments God had said of Himself, “showing *love* to those who *love* Me and keep My commandments.” (**Exodus 20:6**) It is love that fulfils the Law and Jesus fulfilled that Law perfectly in his ministry and supremely in laying down his life for us. He did it for love of God, and for love of us. His triumphant cry from the Cross “It is finished!” (**John 19:30**) can be translated “It is accomplished!” He had fulfilled perfectly both the Law and the Prophets!

Chapter 5:21-48 and chapter 6:1-4 show the genuine outworking of God’s love in our own lives. If we truly love God it follows that we can love our fellow-man. We cannot hold hate in our hearts and call ourselves followers of Christ. **Verses 23,24** show that worship is meaningless while we are holding a grudge against anyone: rather than engage in harmful worship, we must in honesty face the cause of that grudge and deal with it before God. **Verses 27-32** state that purity of action can only stem from purity of mind. Jewish men of that day could divorce a wife for misdemeanours as small as burning the dinner, and women had no recourse to justice: Jesus put the onus fairly and squarely on the man for maintaining a good marriage, and, as throughout his ministry, he upheld the cause of women. In **verse 33-37** he calls for us to live a life of such honesty that people will always know our “yes” means “yes” and our “no” means “no.” **Verse 38** The “eye for eye” principle was originally given to stop the escalation of the “pay back” system of taking vengeance. (**Exodus 21:24**) The law of love takes that negative situation and changes it into a positive one of showing unexpected kindness. **Verse 41** A Roman soldier could force any Jew to carry his pack for him, but only to the next mile-post. By freely carrying the pack to the second mile-post, the Jew would place the soldier under obligation to him and win a moral victory! In this paragraph Jesus is saying, “Be gracious in spite of insults: don’t stand up for your rights: do your duty cheerfully: don’t hold onto your possessions, but be prepared to share them with those in need.”

Verse 43 “**Love your neighbour**” is in the Law, but nowhere does the Law say to hate your enemies! **Leviticus 19:34** and **Deuteronomy 10:19** both say to love the alien living amongst you. Jesus goes one step further: your love must extend even to those who are actively hostile towards you. Only so can we be truly children of our Father, who loved us while we were still enemies towards Him..

Chapter 6:1-4 makes us examine our motives for service. Do we want to be seen in a good light, or do we give to others our time, effort and substance simply in gratitude for what God has first given to us? Our gift is really to Him, through others.

Verses 9-15 We turn now from our outward actions to our inner attitudes. No nation ever had a higher ideal of prayer than the Jews: there was a rabbinic saying, “He who prays within his house surrounds it with a wall that is stronger than iron.” Every Jew was required to recite daily 3 short passages of Scripture and 18 prayers: while both were beautiful and meaningful, to many they were by Jesus’ time no more than a gabbled formula. But that is not how a child talks to a loving father,

and it is precisely because God is our Father that Jesus gave us a model for our prayers. “This, *then*, is how *you* should pray.”

Notice in this “Lord’s Prayer” that the first 3 requests are about God and the next 3 are about us – our past, present and future needs. As in the Beatitudes, divinity bends to the needs of humanity. It is only when God is given His rightful place in our hearts that we can consider our own needs and desires: the result is that God is in all of our lives, fitting everything into its proper place. It is rather like a compass : when the needle is in alignment with the magnetic north, all the other points are in their right place on the dial. We need to keep ourselves aligned with God.

Verses 16-18 Fasting from food today does not entail what it did then, when meals took hours to prepare, so that to go without food gave one much more time to spend in prayer. Today we can make a snack in 5 minutes, but we can still “fast” by deliberately denying ourselves some legitimate pleasure for the sake of our service to God. An obvious example is when one turns off the TV to go out to a prayer meeting! In any case, any “sacrifice” must be between ourselves and God: it is nobody else’s business, and it is God’s business to reward us.

Have you ever experienced a sense of loss when you have given up something for God? Or rather, have you simply felt euphoric? A whimsical old saint once said, “Sometimes God and I play a game: it’s called ‘Let’s see who can give the most’. But it’s no use - God always wins!”

A Wise Investment. Verses 19-24. “Moth and rust” covers the active and passive erosion of even the best this world has to offer. Jesus never said that this world was unimportant, but if we keep our eyes on eternity we will learn to evaluate lightly the things that would bind us to this fleeting life.

Practical Atheism. Verses 25-34. This passage follows on naturally. God Who has a place for us in eternity will surely care for us until we get there! So if we worry, we are acting as if He did not exist. Jesus is not advocating a shiftless or thriftless attitude to life, a lack of prudent foresight: what he is forbidding is the anxiety, the fear, that takes all the fun out of living. Such worry is simply a lack of trust in our loving Father – and that is an insult to Him! Our perfect guide is surely in **verse 33** - “Seek first His kingdom” (outward service) “and His righteousness” (inward spirituality) “and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Use Your Brains! Chapter 7:1-28. But Jesus does not only appeal to our hearts: he has a message for our minds as well. Sadly, verse 1 is often quoted by someone trying to escape censure for some wrong act. The word “judge” is used here in the sense of a court judge who determines the punishment for the accused: in other words it is not our business to heap our own form of punishment onto some transgressor. That is God’s responsibility. Rather, we should look at our own lives and get rid of any wrong lurking there. But Jesus went on to say, “*Then* you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye,” which simply means that, in humility and with grace we need to care for others who have fallen by the wayside, even if it must involve pointing out to them their fault. We should use the brains God gave us to judge who are false prophets, or wolves in sheep’s clothing (**verse 15, 16**): for the sake of the health of the whole Church we must evaluate those who would ruin the fellowship. We are not judging a vine when we pick its grapes: we are just assessing what is obvious: “By their fruit you will recognize them”.

Verses 7-12 give us the wonderful assurance of the goodness of our Father, He Who delights in showering good gifts on His children. The “Golden Rule” is found in negative form in rabbinic Judaism, and in Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism; it also occurred in various forms in Greek and Roman ethical teaching. Jesus transformed it into the positive form.

Verses 13-23 contain a warning: God’s way is the only way, despite the many who advance their various theories. And it is not enough to give a mental assent to Christ’s teaching: to be His, we must commit our whole lives to him – our heart, soul and mind. To know him is to have a relationship with him: this Eternal Law is the Law of Love. Jesus is the Truth, not an opinion.

Verses 24-27 The houses both looked the same in fair weather: adversity showed up the difference. Jesus never promised us escape from adversity, but he did say, “Surely I am with you always!” (**Matt 28:20**)

Verses 28, 29 It is hard for us to imagine the astonishment and even outrage aroused in his hearers at the authority that Jesus claimed for himself. His claim to be God was implicit right from the beginning of his ministry. To them it was mind-boggling, but to us, we are quite familiar with the fact that the Person who said, “I say to you”, is the great “I AM”. This being so, we can do no less than put his words into practice!