

## The Gospel According to Saint Matthew

Session 5 – Wednesday April 29, 2020

We ended last time by looking at the Beatitudes, the opening of the first and largest of the five blocks of teaching in Matthew's gospel – the Sermon on the Mount.

The teaching is directed specifically to Jesus' disciples. We have observed that, unlike Mark's gospel, what Jesus says and does is the basis for the disciples' words and actions. In turn, what the disciples teach, preach, and do, is the example for Jesus' disciples in every generation.

The state of being blessed rests in the *nearness of the kingdom* Christ has come to establish. The people who are dependent upon God, the poor and oppressed, the grieving, the humble, those who hunger for God's justice, are now in a position to have their needs met, and to find deep-seated *happiness*, in the pursuit of the way of *righteousness, peace-making, and inner purity*.

5:13-16;

In verses 13-16 we have a succinct summary of what it means to be a disciple. Matthew states it emphatically: *You yourselves are the salt of the earth... You yourselves are the light of the world.* To belong to the kingdom requires that you reflect the light of the kingdom through good deeds.

When Jesus began His ministry we heard Isaiah 9:2, *the people who sat in*

*darkness have seen a great light.* Jesus' disciples are to be engaged in that same ministry; and it is really quite fabulous how immediately Jesus connects His disciples to Himself: *You yourselves are the light of the world.* Jesus elevates His disciples very highly. Again, we note how differently Matthew presents the disciples than we find in the other gospels.

Jesus and His disciples are both engaged in bringing light to a dark world and thereby enabling others to *glorify your Father in heaven.*

Matthew identifies God as *Father* 45 times in his gospel, 17 of them in the Sermon on the Mount. Only John uses *Father* more frequently than Matthew. What is unique to Matthew is the modifier *heaven*, or *heavenly*. Mark uses that expression only once. It was common in both the Jewish and Greek tradition to speak of God as Father, but it is the New Testament that makes the greatest use of it. *Heavenly Father* identifies God as being both immanent and transcendent.

5:17-20

These verses don't surprise us, given that we have already encountered Matthew's interest in the Law, and the importance of the theme of *Righteousness* in relation to the Law. Being the *light of the world* is connected directly with Law and righteousness.

The word Pharisee means *separated ones*. The Pharisees were concerned to preserve the distinctiveness of Judaism and had numerous interpretations

of the Torah concerning ritual cleanliness, dietary habits, and Sabbath activities. These were designed to be constant reminders of God's faithfulness in the midst of the details of everyday life. In practice, they could become substitutes for inward obedience. Jesus criticizes them for *having cups that are clean on the outside but are full of violence inside*.

In these verses Jesus tells us that His disciples must be more righteous than the acknowledged teachers of the Torah. The disciples of Jesus are to be even more *separated* than the Pharisees. Their righteousness is to be radical or they will never enter the kingdom of heaven (5:20). This emphasizes the radical nature of the call of the disciples in the last chapter, where the radical nature was characterized by leaving behind all that was familiar. Now it is given greater, positive, content.

*Righteousness* is founded in obedience to the Law, and is manifested in behaviour that may be at odds with ritual convention as expressed by the Pharisees (7:12). This obedience is a precursor to the active righteousness, which is thematic to this Gospel.

True obedience is the common denominator of Jesus' teachings on adultery, divorce, oaths, retaliation, almsgiving, prayer, and fasting that follow this passage. Obedience is explicitly expressed in Jesus' teachings about trees and their fruits (7:15-20). The theme continues in Jesus' warning that one must be a doer, not just a hearer, to enter into the kingdom of heaven (7:21-28).

Jesus denies twice in v17 that He has come to destroy the Law. This suggests, perhaps, that in Matthew's community there was some question about that. The point turns on the question of the word *fulfil*.

Literally, that means *Fill to the full*. It brings with it associations such as we find in various translations: *accomplish, complete, finish*. In some sense Jesus fulfils the Mosaic Law by bringing it to its intended meaning. The debate is whether Jesus fulfils the Law in relation to His deeds or His teaching.

Matthew has presented the idea that the whole of Scripture finds its fulfilment in Jesus. He is the fulfilment of Israel as the Son of God, as well fulfilling the Law and the Prophets.

Nb. The Old Testament only uses *Amen, Truly, Verily*, as we use it at the end of a prayer. The gospel writers add emphasis to Jesus' teaching by putting it at the beginning. Matthew uses it as an introductory statement far more than the other gospel writers, but never doubles it, as John does.

5:21-48

This section is sometimes called *The Antitheses*, in which Jesus gives His interpretation of the Law. *You have heard it said, but I tell you...*

21-26 on anger

We have the direct quote from the Ten Commandments, and then we have Jesus' teaching on that Law, in which He penetrates to the spirit of the commandment.

The heart, the inner person, is to be transformed by the transforming power of the kingdom Jesus is bringing into being. Any inclination of the heart that is contrary to the way of that kingdom, the light of that kingdom, is subject to divine judgement, as is murder itself. Thoughts are as significant, perhaps even more significant than actions.

We must try to recognize how radical this teaching is. The inclination of the heart is what is judged. The dreadful story of Acteon expresses the Hellenistic understanding of divine judgment. Acteon is out hunting and chances upon a pool of water where the goddess Artemis is bathing. He didn't mean to see her, he wasn't spying, it was pure chance. But he transgressed the Law, and so he is punished by being turned into a stag and is torn to pieces by his own dogs. It's a horrible story, but it shows how the inclination of the heart was largely irrelevant to the concept of justice.

Similarly, the Pharisees are concerned about the outward observance of the

Law as the path to righteousness. *An outwardly clean cup but full of violence.*

Jesus is presenting a significantly different understanding of justice, and it governs what He has to say about adultery, vv27-30 ; divorce, vv31-32; oaths, vv33-37; retaliation, vv38-42; and loving one's enemies, vv43-48.

The concluding statement in v48 is a summation of all the antitheses, and of the beatitudes as well. The call to be perfect, as God, our *heavenly Father* is perfect, is found in the Old Testament. It is similar, also, to the call to holiness found in Leviticus: *Be holy, for I, the Lord God am holy.* Leviticus 19:2 The idea of being called to imitate God in our way of being, in thought and action, is found throughout the Psalms and elsewhere. But here, the perfection is firmly grounded in Christ's interpretation of the Law, which is rooted in the command to Love.

It is this command to love with God's love that is at the heart of what Jesus means when He says: *You have heard... but I say.* Jesus is not providing us with an alternative set of external laws to follow. He is providing the key for interpreting all Law, including the ones He now articulates concerning divorce, oaths, and retaliation. Love is the key for determining God's will, and righteous action.

Matthew's use of *heavenly Father*, again makes us to understand that Love is both transcendent and imminent. It is not our Love that makes us perfect, but God's Love in us. Part of the perfection of our heavenly Father is the

unity of *will* and *action*, and we are to establish that same unity in following Jesus.

In 6:1-18 we have a new section of the sermon that addresses three aspects of the religious life: almsgiving, prayer, fasting. 6:1-4; 5-15; 16-18;

The word *hypocrite* comes from the word used for an *actor* – someone who pretends to be someone else. It is a word Jesus uses throughout the gospel in relation to the Pharisees 7:5; 15:7; 22:18; 24:51. In 15:8 Matthew uses the word with reference to Isaiah 29:13: *This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.* In Chapter 23, following Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, Matthew has another extended teaching section in which the hypocrisy of the Pharisees is denounced vigorously.

There appears to be a contradiction presented in this section. Previously, Jesus told the disciples to *show their good deeds so that others will glorify God.* Here, they are taught to do what they do in secret, almost a secret to themselves, so that *their left hand doesn't know what their right hand is doing.* What distinguishes between the two is the object of the glory. In the examples Jesus gives, both Jewish and Gentile, the object of glorification is the hypocrites themselves, not their heavenly father. The good deeds of the hypocrites are undertaken, in effect, to buy the praise of others, rather than seeking to please God, and to align their thoughts and deeds with His.