

The Gospel According to Saint Matthew

Session 6 – Wednesday May 6, 2020

The Sermon on the Mount is the first and largest of the five teaching blocks in Matthew's gospel, and in it we begin to learn what it means to be a *follower* of Jesus. The Sermon is delivered especially to the disciples and is given immediately after the radical call to leave behind the familiar, and to begin living in a new way. The foundation upon which the new life is built is becoming *poor in spirit*; recognizing that one is not self-sufficient, but requires grace from God and from the community of God's people. It is the attribute that allows one to respond to the prophetic call to repent, with which both John the Baptist and Jesus begin their ministries. That is what allows us access to the *kingdom of heaven* which has *come near* in Christ.

Further, we are beginning to acquire a sense of what is meant by *righteousness*, and its relationship with the Law. In the *Antitheses*, Jesus says *you have heard...* and then He quotes one of the Ten Commandments, *but I say unto you...* and then He gives His own interpretation of the Law.

At first it appears that Jesus is simply giving us a different, and more rigorous, set of Laws to follow governing adultery, divorce, oaths, retaliation, almsgiving, prayer, and fasting.

But what we discover is that Jesus is not giving a new set of external laws to be kept in a legalistic way, but rather, He is giving us the key to unlock the

mystery of God's eternal purpose that undergirds all of the Law. That key is Love. Love is the fulfilling of the Law. All righteousness, all obedience to the Law in thought and act, is determined by reference to Love.

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 complete unity of *thought, will, and deed*. We are to become perfect by establishing that same unity, wholeness, within us. Perfection in this world becomes possible to the extent that we become a *follower* of Jesus, who is perfectly one with His Father.

Jesus addresses three aspects of the religious life: almsgiving, prayer, fasting. 6:1-4; 5-15; 16-18. Earlier in the Sermon Jesus told the disciples to let their good deeds shine before others, so they will glorify God. In this section Jesus urges the good deeds to be done *secretly*. Apparently, when large donations to the Temple were made, they were accompanied by the blasting of a trumpet to make those around aware of the generosity being displayed. (Not all scholars agree that this was the practice). But the intention of the donor, Jesus suggests, was self-glorification, not to further the glory of God. They purchased glory for themselves, and have their reward.

The Lord's Prayer breaks up the harmony of these three sections. If it was not there the passages would better be balanced, which leads some people to believe that the Lord's Prayer was inserted later.

Against that idea is the powerful way that Jesus' prayer draws together two themes that have been explored by Matthew, and brings them into practical daily life. First, it emphasizes the union between Jesus and His disciples with which Jesus began the Sermon – *You, yourselves, are the light of the world*. Because of that union, Jesus prays with His disciples: *Our Father...* Second, it adds further weight to the understanding that we are God's own child, God's own children, just as Israel and Jesus are both identified as God's Son. So, in our daily life we are to incorporate that understanding in our daily conversation with God in prayer.

The prayer is both centred in this present world, and yet is equally grounded in the coming Kingdom. It has both an earthly and eschatological direction. *Give us today our daily bread*.

We last encountered *bread* in the gospel when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. Bread is connected with the Law, and with righteousness. But we saw also that Matthew quoted a passage from Exodus in which bread also meant earthly sustenance. So, both meanings are present here. The sixth petition is *do not bring us to temptation*. But we have already seen that *temptation in the wilderness* is part of being God's Son, both Israel and Jesus. It is a petition which likewise has an ordinary aspect as well as an

eschatological one, a point emphasized by the seventh petition: *And deliver us from the Evil one.*

There was a general assumption that there would be a period of great temptation before the final eschatological judgment, as we discover articulated in the *Revelation to Saint John*. These two petitions together might be rendered: *Do not lead us into a testing of our faith that is beyond our endurance, but when the Testing does come, deliver us from the Evil one.*

Verses 19-24 serve as a summary, of sorts. What unites them are the ideas we have already explored surrounding Jesus' call to the disciples to follow Jesus. Where is your treasure? Is it the boat, the nets, your father? And by implication, the traditions concerning righteousness that you have inherited? Place your heart in heaven, in the divine Love, which rightly values all things.

Jesus has come to bring light to those who sit in darkness, so we are to be full of His light, and gain *sound vision*. It is not possible to love in an earthly way, and a heavenly way; to serve God and mammon. Why? Because earthly love ultimately seeks to purchase glory for oneself rather than God. And yet, the whole purpose of the Sermon is to teach us that it is possible to love on earth in a godly way.

This is brought out in the beautiful passage following – vv25-34. *Do not be anxious about anything. God knows all your needs and will address them. Seek*

*first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.
Do not be anxious.*

The marvellous thing about this passage is that it places into perspective Jesus' radical call to discipleship, to leave everything behind, and to become even more *separated* than the Scribes and Pharisees. One of the really cruel things about cults is that it separates people from their families. Usually it is presented as being necessary in order to be pure. It is possible to hear the radical call to discipleship in a similar light. And we shall hear the radicalness of the call again in Matthew. But these verses puts that call in perspective - even that call is not something to be anxious about. We don't have to separate ourselves from everything, we have only to acquire a new way to love everything.

Chapter 7

Verses 1-5 deal primarily with relationships within the community of faith. The Sermon is directed chiefly to Jesus' disciples; our brothers and sisters, are those who pray with us to *Our Father*. The teaching, then, isn't about judging people outside the community and seeing the beam that is in the eye of non-believers. To do that would make us a *hypocrite*, someone by definition outside the fellowship of those who are meant to be the light of the world. It's about judging, finding faults or deficiencies among our brothers and sisters. St Paul spends a lot of time writing about fractiousness within the Church.

Yet, v6 is clearly about people outside the fellowship of Jesus' disciples. Those individuals, or groups of people, are described as *dogs* and *swine*.

Jesus is not just speaking about being polite and kindly. He is speaking about *holiness*. The mission of the disciples is to call people to holiness – that is the pearl. The reference to dogs and pigs is not characterising any individual or any group of people as being unworthy to receive the ministry of the disciples. It is a comment, rather, on the response that some people will have to their ministry. Some people will hear and respond animalistically, according to earthly passions, not heavenly Love.

Jesus is saying that the disciples shouldn't persist in their ministry to people who are unresponsive, or aggressive in their response, but rather proceed to carry the gospel to others who may receive it with gladness. Matthew will return to this idea again.

Vv 7-12 focus on God's faithfulness and generosity as the basis for our confidence in *knocking* and *asking*. Where the goodness and generosity of earthly parents can be seen, we should know our heavenly Father is even more consistent and more generous. Again, we find joined together *bread* and *stone*, as we did in the Temptation in the wilderness. That connection is further emphasized by the reference to the serpent – to the devil.

Matthew may be bringing that narrative to mind here to have us continue to think about what we are asking for in *our daily bread*. In the Temptation

Jesus had to know His unique mission, and not be distracted from it by secondary goods. Meeting the earthly needs of God's people, turning stones into bread, is a good and godly thing to do. But Jesus' primary and unique mission is to provide the eternal heavenly bread of the new kingdom.

Similarly, the disciples must be clear about their primary mission. On the one hand, that mission is not to be wasted, as it were, on those who are un-responsive. Don't throw pearls before swine. But, on the other hand, we have in V12 the Golden Rule. It is a simple exegesis of Leviticus 19:18 – *You shall love your neighbour as yourself*. Jesus says this again after entering Jerusalem, in Chapter 22:35-40. There He explicitly cites Leviticus and Deuteronomy 6:5, as the two commandments upon which *the whole law and the prophets depend*.

That way leads to good fruit being produced. Here we return to the imagery first put forward by John the Baptist in the trees that produce good fruit and those that produce bad – an image Jesus takes up repeatedly in Matthew's gospel. There is judgment – divine judgment. But the emphasis is on taking the road of Love and bearing good fruit. Love, then, is the narrow gate which few are able to enter, but it is the only way of discipleship, and this is the mission from which the disciples are not to be distracted. Ultimately, then, *our daily bread* is Love.

Love is what distinguishes true disciples from those who claim to *prophesy*,

cast out demons, and perform miracles in [Christ's] Name. It may also serve as a warning to the disciples to continually strive for singleness of heart and mind. Are we serving God or mammon? Seeking God's glory or our own? Is holiness our primary motivation?

In the parable that closes the Sermon on the Mount, verse 26f, *foolishness* is linked with *blindness*. Matthew is the only gospel writer to use the word *foolishness*. The foolishness lies in hearing, but not *doing* the words of Jesus. It is intriguing that Matthew employs this word, given what we heard in the first Antitheses about anger: *Whoever says – You fool! is liable to judgment.*

The final verse indicates that, although the Sermon on the Mount is addressed to the disciples in particular, yet here are those outside the family who have heard and been moved by Jesus' teaching. Whereas the Scribes and Pharisees depend upon the teachings of others to validate their own teaching, Jesus teaches with His own authority. Moses' teaching from Sinai, was not his, but God's teaching. Jesus' teaching on the mount is both His own and His Father's.