

The Greatest Sermon  
Ever Preached

*Our Lord's Words In Matthew 5 - 7*

*A few brief studies on  
the Sermon on the Mount*

**By Peter Y. De Jong**

## Preface

No sermon can compare with the Sermon on the Mount. It comes with the authority of the Lord Jesus himself, in whom alone is life and light and liberty. He alone can set us free from sin and all its consequences. And here his message shines with incomparable clarity and comprehensiveness. All the rest of his words spoken while on earth are best understood in the light of these. Those only explain - often briefly but sometimes in detail - what is summarized for us here. And everything is about "the kingdom of heaven," the rule of the one true God through Jesus Christ in the hearts and lives of his people.

Here are several introductions to its contents for your reflection and discussion. Through the centuries countless sermons have preached on a verse or two. No message, however, can ever exhaust its text. How, then, can we hope to do justice to this awe-inspiring sermon in a simple series? Cheerfully we make no pretension to explaining the detail or depth which this Sermon deserves.

Our threefold aim is a far more modest, even an elementary one. First, to see the unity from which our Lord for never a moment strayed from his "theme." Secondly, to recognize how perfectly and persuasively He moves from one section to the next. And always, very personally and practically, to stir us to realize how far short we fall as kingdom-seekers. Only then can and will we seek the Lord Jesus more faithfully as God's gift who fulfills all righteousness for us and enables us to grow in grace and godliness to his praise.

These pages are but a little lamp to illumine your path. Use it after you first hear Christ speaking in these passages. And even your discussions, no matter how thoroughly done, will be able to draw out all the sweet nectar which is found here, Christ's words, indeed, are life for all who believe and strive to practice them each day anew. His truth, my friends, is always deeper and fuller than we can fathom.

- Peter Y. De Jong

3. Why did the Israelites listen so eagerly to "false" rather than to "true and faithful prophets of the Lord?" Are you also "testing" what you read and hear everyday, also about the Bible?

4. What are "wolves" like? Why does Jesus call them "ravenous?"

5. Do you think the warning here is only against preachers of the wrong kind?

6. What alone is the "norm" or "standard" by which we must test what we hear and believe? What does that require of us by way of knowledge and insight? What must you do when the preaching, teaching and pastoral care in your church falls far short of the gospel?

7. And now in a very practical way, how can you and your loved ones build every day on Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord?

## Table of Contents

<b>1. And Jesus Came... Preaching!</b> .....	Page 1
Matthew 4:23 - 5:1	
<b>2. Are We Citizens Of God's Kingdom?</b> .....	Page 5
Matthew 5:2-10	
<b>3. Straight Talk From The Saviour's Lips</b> .....	Page 9
Matthew 5:11-16	
<b>4. Christ, The Kingdom, And The Law</b> .....	Page 14
Matthew 5:17-20	
<b>5. Living According To The Kingdom-Style</b> .....	Page 19
Matthew 5:21-32	
<b>6. Patterns For Christian Perfection</b> .....	Page 23
Matthew 5:33-48	
<b>7. The Only Piety Which Pleases Our God</b> .....	Page 28
Matthew 6:1-18	
<b>8. Growing Into Our Kingdom Citizenship</b> .....	Page 33
Matthew 6:19-34	
<b>9. Keeping Our Life On A Steady Course</b> .....	Page 38
Matthew 7:1-12	
<b>10. How Faithfully Are We Seeking The Kingdom?</b> ....	Page 43
Matthew 7:13-29	

Originally this material was arranged to show the basic unity of the Sermon on the Mount in seven lessons. However, the material - as we know all too well - is so rich and full that three have been added. Even these can be divided for group study. For that the sub-headings may prove helpful. And the questions included are only suggestions to keep the discussion going. Soon others will arise.

Also in nearly every church library you can easily find helpful commentaries on this greatest of all sermons to supplement what is found here.

Added is his command to discern the "true" from the "false," our Lord says, "You will know them by their fruits." Be on guard, lest you are caught in their trap, which can only bring disappointment and even disaster. Some, demanding the sacrifice of every earthly delight which God gives his children, including even their life's savings, are fattening themselves with all the profits they can accumulate. Others, making a great show of humility and self-denial in public speech, indulge in the lusts of the flesh behind the scenes. And then there are some, fully as dangerous, who loudly shout the wonderful grace of God and gather in the multitudes without warning against that broad way which leads to destruction. Easily can this list be enlarged by Christians who take Christ's warning to heart.

For the great Day of Days is surely coming. These leaders, too, will have to appear before Christ who judges the living and the dead. All their pious protestations of "Lord, Lord" while pointing to their accomplishments will avail nothing. Instead, they will hear the most awesome and terrifying words ever spoken, "Depart from me, you evildoers."

### *Work Every Day As You Build For The Life To Come*

Do these final words of Jesus sound strange in your ears? They should not, since everyone on earth is "building a house" of some kind wherein he or she lives every day. It matters little how small or large, how commonplace or lovely in the eyes of others. It is the "house" of ourselves with body and soul. And the safety or un-safety of living in this house always depends on the "foundations" on which it rests.

These are of only two kinds. Immediately the Jews knew what our Lord was talking about in these words, which are much like a parable. Some in those days, too, might build on very unstable and shifting soil because the plot was cheap. But if and when the winds blew strongly or the rain fell in sudden

where He performed his first miracle but also in Judea and Jerusalem. Even more, He had demonstrated by several miracles that a very special time had come to challenge those crowds who came to hear him. All this He did by way of "teaching" and "preaching," two very important words. By way of both He explained "the kingdom of heaven," a term which we will meet again and again in the New Testament.

At the outset we should be clear on its significance. This kingdom is the "rule" the covenant God was establishing through the Lord Jesus in whom "the righteousness of that kingdom" is perfected. Everyone who believes on him is promised full salvation for time and eternity. In this sense the kingdom stands for all of its privileges and responsibilities. Although the Jews were well acquainted with the idea of God's kingdom, they were hopelessly entangled in a very mistaken notion of its character and its citizenry. Only by way of Christ's teaching, humbly received, could and would those false notions be corrected. But because so many of them refused to be corrected - cherishing their vain hopes for political freedom from Roman oppression together with earthly prosperity of every sort - the battle-lines were soon drawn.

### *And Now A Little On Preaching*

In our day it is often so lightly esteemed. Believers tend to take it much too casually. Others mock with it as simply the ideas and opinions of someone able to speak with some effectiveness.

Here a very special word is used. It means "to announce the good news." Hence all preaching is to be about God and his mighty work for the salvation for lost sinners. And when rightly done, it comes with God's own authority. He stands in for his word. And, strange it may seem to us, it is always effective. Each time it is either "as fragrance unto life" or "unto death."

## Lesson 10

### How Faithfully Are We Seeking The Kingdom?

*"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."*

- Matthew 7:21

**SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 7:13 - 29**

Some sermons, like old and world-weary soldiers, simply fade away into obscurity. Not so any of our Lord's messages, least of all the Sermon on the Mount. His message has a "punch-line" which either knocks people senseless or arouses them to action. And this one consists of three parts.

#### *Watch Every Day Where You Are Walking*

Only two gates and two roads through life. Where you and I land at the end will depend on the choice we make. So clearly is this set forth that few words need to be added. When our Lord spoke these words, most Jews in those days could remember how the book of Psalms began. Those songs were introduced much like these words of Jesus. Only the godly truly flourish on the earth. Only they bear the ripened fruit of serving the God of the covenant. Only they are "known," recognized by him, as the ones upon He has set his love. All the others are "like chaff which the wind blows away;" they will surely "perish."

Here the picture with the same message is a bit different. It describes travelers on a journey.

Jesus reminds his hearers that so "narrow" are both the gate and the road that only a "few" ever find it. The eyes of our soul have to be sharp and keen in order to discern it. The other is far "wider" at the entrance as well as much easier

3. Mention a few of our Lord's miracles. Show how each points to some blessing of the kingdom.

4. Paul often tells us that he "modeled" his ministry after that of Jesus. Can you give examples of this?

5. How can anyone know whether or not he is "called" to be an official preacher and teacher?

6. What qualities and gifts do you look for in a preacher? Are your choices biblical? Do we sometimes expect too much of our preachers?

7. How would you characterize a "Christ-like" ministry?

Never does He give his children a "stone" instead of the bread. Also the strength we need to do his will cheerfully. When we trust him with a childlike faith, He gives grace to triumph over life's disappointments and distresses. His open hand and heart are bountiful beyond all our understanding and measuring. Simply trust and obey. That is the "key" to the Sermon on the Mount, for there is no other way to the blessedness which our Lord Jesus promises his people.

### **For Reflection And Discussion**

1. What is the difference between judging someone's words or deeds and judging the person himself? When is the former right? Why is the latter always wrong?
2. Why are we often "so quick to blame and slow to praise?"
3. The Jews in our Lord's day were continually bickering and criticizing each other and their authorities. Are people today, including ourselves, much better?
4. What happens in a family engaged in "nit-picking" and "nagging criticisms?" Is that also the kind of "judging" against which Jesus warns strongly?

is made of "his disciples," that is, his pupils, learners who were already following him in faith and obedience. And certainly they alone "learned" by hearing and obeying his words. At the same time, the rest were also "taught" but by refusing him and his words they have no share in the kingdom of heaven.

### ***And Now On The Beatitudes***

Each statement consists of three distinct parts. First, the "blessedness" which is assured. Then the characteristics manifested in their lives. And finally, the promise fulfilled in their lives.

At the outset remember that these belong together. No one will exist without something of all the rest. Nor are those qualities of life as a response of the self always evident equally or much less perfectly. Here there is growth in God's grace which will produce godliness. But this fruit comes only in proportion as it is cultivated by the individual. We grieve the Holy Spirit, who works that grace within us, when we become very satisfied with ourselves. Thus it is a humbling but necessary experience to be taught also this repeatedly.

The word "blessedness" is a state of being, often translated happiness. And that it truly becomes as we grow up into Christ. But it is also more. Of all the languages I consulted only the Dutch has attempted to catch its many-splendored richness. In a compound word they combine the ideas of well-being, happiness and even salvation. And the promised reward in each case simply points to its many aspects.

Jesus begins with "poor in spirit," found only with those who feel an emptiness within. And this soon produced that "mourning," an awareness of our, misery caused by sin. Jesus adds that these people are also "meek" and "merciful." They do "hunger and thirst for righteousness," which He soon explains in greater detail. Three others follow to conclude with being

Earlier He warned against pushing others aside by our careless words. Now He emphasizes this by calling it a "judging" of our fellow men. How quickly parents, especially fathers, can do this to their sons or daughters. Also teachers in school and every one of us when someone has done something wrong. The scribes and Pharisees were masters at this. They set themselves up as judges over everyone around them. They fine-tuned this as a daily practice, condemning harshly all who failed to keep even the smallest of their rules for life. And see how good they felt about themselves! It was so easy to find fault with others while failing to keep the weightier matter of God's law, which is "love," which always seeks to help instead of hurt.

Don't think for a moment that we are free from this terrible sin. Giving in to it - and there are Christians criticizing somebody or something - we are deceiving ourselves. While picking failings and flaws in someone else's life, we refuse to see and confess the greater sins of self-righteousness in ourselves. Measuring others by what we think is God's law, we soon refuse to apply it to ourselves. And "how very happy we then feel about ourselves," doesn't it? But Jesus reminds us of its fearful consequences. As we "judge" others, so will God himself also judge and condemn us.

It should not surprise us; therefore, that Jesus concludes this section with what we often call "the Golden Rule." Confucius, that ancient teacher of the Chinese people, taught of it in a negative way. "Don't do to others," said he, "what you don't want them to do to you." The Savior reminds us that such a "negative" is never good enough. He insists on truly loving others without exception, always dealing compassionately with them even when they go astray. Above all else, we are to seek their welfare for time and eternity. And when we know the dangers and depths of our own sins, we will not condemn carelessly or harshly, lest we fall under the hot displeasure of God himself.

6. Explain the meaning of "pure in heart." Are such people perfect?

7. What does it mean to make peace? How are we to do this in daily life?

2. Are you and I willing to examine what we really treasure most of all?

3. Do you ever ask what you did for Christ that day? If not, why not?

4. What did Jesus mean by "rust" which consumes and "thieves" who break through and steal?

5. Why is all worrying so self-destructive as well as insulting to our God? Why, too, is it so easy for us to fall into this trap from time to time?

6. Show from our Lord's examples that we indeed are to plan and to work. After all, the flowers and the birds, each according to their own nature, are active in their work.

7. How should our praying to God for grace always be connected with our singing? How much singing do you really do - at home, in church and especially when you are alone?

Usually we think of persecution in terms of being tortured even to the point of death. And many early Christians experienced that. Even more so during the past hundred years and today in countries like Mexico, Columbia, the Sudan, India and China. But there is a far more "subtle" persecution going on right around you. Faithful believers are being "ridiculed," "reproached" and even suffering pain from family, friends and fellow workers every day.

And why? Here the answer is simple. It is because the disciples of Jesus are really "different." They confess their sins. They are meek and merciful. They hunger and thirst for God's righteousness. Instead of striking back in word and deed, they try to be peacemakers. In all this, they seek to show their love for God and fellowmen including those who are their enemies. And being so "different" the unbelieving world - to which belong also church people who have the "form" but not the "power of godliness" - can't stand. The believer's attitudes and actions are a witness which rebukes their own life-style. This they know and feel in their hearts. This they resent, no matter how hard they at times try to cower up. And so they have to hit back with the weapons of the world - those mean and nasty and painful words which easily produce lies and even violent attacks.

Why then "rejoice and be glad?" Here our Lord speaks of the "reward in heaven." Not that it waits until they get to heaven after death. Right while his people suffer this distress, God himself takes note of it. At the same time the strange fruits of being persecuted bear a wholesome fruit in Christ's followers. They know themselves part of a multitude who like them have suffered for God's sake at the hands of evil people. And they rejoice in the assurance that they truly are citizens of the heavenly kingdom.



### *Also, By Laying Aside Every Earthly Anxiety*

Here the message remains the same. You can't allow yourself to trust God in everything and then be worrying about earthly things at the same time. It doesn't work at all.

Older translations read "take no thought..." This reading is apt to mislead us into supposing that we can live an idle and useless life. What Jesus is actually saying is, "Don't load your mind down so heavily with worrying about your body or food or clothing or anything else on earth that you cannot be laying up treasures in heaven." You cannot do both at the same time and then grow in your kingdom citizenship!

Here I used for what is translated worrying the word "anxiety." And anxiety, which derives from the Latin language, means driving ourselves into a tight corner from which we cannot escape. What a dreadful situation to be in. But such, my friends, is the way of the world. Sooner or later, if those people have any sense at all of life's uncertainties, this will be their lot. Worrying and worrying themselves endlessly with one thing or another is always such a dead-end street.

With that as the perfect teacher our Lord gives two striking examples. First the birds in the sky and then the lilies in the field. The birds seem to fly around so easily and effortlessly. The flowers so quietly bloom to grace the ground and bear seed for the next generation. Each simply acts according to its own nature. So should it to be for every kingdom citizen. As children of the heavenly Father they are simply to be what He wants them to be - trusting always that He will supply them with everything necessary for their lives. Remember now - for Jesus also adds this - we are neither birds nor flowers. We are persons endowed with mind and will and emotion. And these we are to exercise with a trusting faith in our God. We, therefore, do plan our lives, do our duty according to God's will, seek to be a blessing to others. But in

### *Responding*

All this, indeed, sounds pleasing to the ear and even encouraging. But it does absolutely no good, unless what we are taught is truly believed and put into practice. Towards the close of the Sermon on the Mount the Savior will warn sternly against any "talk" which is not earned out in a daily "walk."

At the same time a much-needed warning. Do not be ashamed of being a "light" in the world. Only a foolish person puts a lamp under a bowl or bushel. It does no good at all there.

All Christian living, both in attitude and action, is to have one all-controlling purpose. It is that the heavenly Father, the God of our salvation, will receive all the glory and praise. The chief end or highest purpose of being Christ's disciples is never to feel content with ourselves or enjoy the praise of men, rather "to glorify" him whose we are and whom we serve. We whose lives have been changed by God's grace are to recognize ourselves are his "advertisements." We are placed in this dark world "to show forth the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light." (1 Peter 2:9) That's what being a disciple of the Lord Jesus is always about.

### **For Reflection And Discussion**

1. Are Christians being persecuted in our country? If so, where and why? If not, why not? Are you being persecuted at times?
2. Give several reasons why we can and should "rejoice" when we suffer for Christ's sake.

## Lesson 8

### Growing Into Our Kingdom Citizenship

*"For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all things will be given to you as well."*

- Matthew 6:32, 33

**SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 6:19 - 34**

We've been told often that when the first Russian aeronaut returned from space, he claimed he could not find God in heaven up there; so He of course did not exist.

Well, that is how worldly-wise people have been arguing for years. What you can't see simply can't exist. Therefore all we need be concerned about is this world and what it has to offer. One day - what a terrifying thought - such people will perish along with this present age.

Against such patterns of thought and conduct our Lord warns seriously. He knows how easily his followers can stumble into that deadly trap. This He does in a double way and that twice over. First He tells us what we may not do; then what we must do. And those two ways are like two sides of the same penny. The one is really impossible without the other. As far as those worldly-wise people are concerned, we do well to ask them if they have ever "seen love" with their naked eyes or "placed joy and peace" under a microscope. Then don't let them fool you by their words, "Well, we can see them in action." Here by arguing just as we do they give their own game away. We can't see God and heaven with our physical eyes; but we do see and deeply experience them in action! And in that kind of kingdom-living we are to grow.

## Lesson 4

### Christ, The Kingdom And The Law

*"I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."*

- Matthew 5:20

**SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 5:17 - 20**

What a precious gift the God of the covenant gave to the Israelites. With them, by revealing his perfect law for their lives, He had dealt with them as with no other people under the heavens. Having rescued them from Egyptian slavery - a symbol of sin and its effects - He showed them the way to experience his favor. But ever since the days of Ezra that law had been increasingly externalized. To it, the scribes and Pharisees who pondered it daily, had added the applications by way of no less than 613 regulations. Each had to be observed meticulously, even though these leaders found "escape-hatches" for themselves.

Now Jesus had come teaching and preaching "the kingdom of heaven." And with his coming to bring the "good news of salvation," He to their minds and hearts was much too easy-going about God's laws. He allowed his disciples to pluck grain on the Sabbath to still their hunger. He healed cripples and lepers on that holy day. Surely He was a law-breaker who deserved according to Moses' ordinance to be put to death. Only by keeping them - they believed they could do that in their own strength - could anyone at all inherit the blessed kingdom. And knowing their evil thoughts, He challenges them openly.

#### *Answering His Critics*

How unmistakable is here our Lord's understanding of his own position and calling. Far from being a law-breaker, even to the least degree, He had come to "fulfill" all the command-

### *On Fasting*

Also fasting was a spiritual exercise common in the days of our Lord. It required going without food and drink for a certain period of time. God prescribed it for everyone on the great Day of Atonement. (Lev. 31:23 - 27, etc.) Later after the exile four such yearly days for fasting were introduced (Zech 8:10) with even a fifth. (Esth. 9:31) The word used should explain its character. True fasting is always a matter of the heart. The word means "to afflict the soul." Think here of Ezra, Daniel and several others. Its purpose was to express grief, sorrow for sin and a plea for God's help in time of need. Because people often thought that fasting itself guaranteed a favorable answer from God, the prophets warned sternly against any such notions. (Isa. 58:5 - 12; Jer. 14:11, 12; Zech 7)

Now the Pharisees in those days fasted often, usually every Monday and Thursday. And while our Lord left room for fasting, He exposed much of their hypocrisy. Often the religious leaders went about with long and gloomy faces as proofs of their great piety. With that He turns everything upside-down. When you fast, said He, "anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men, but by your Father who sees in secret."

How the God of our salvation despises all pretense and public display in our religious exercises. The abiding principle for true godliness is clear. True worship is a matter of the heart. It seeks only the approval of God; never the praise of men. And with such kingdom citizens He indeed is always well pleased.

#### **For Reflection And Discussion**

1. Why should our giving be directed first of all to the poor and distressed? Who are to be included in this?

"heart," not first of all the fruit of an intellectual choice. Nor is such faith natural and instinctive with mankind. Later Paul, especially in Ephesians 2:9, 10 will state this clearly. It is God's free gift of grace, a new heart as promised already by the prophet Jeremiah. Only such a life, turned upside-down and inside-out by the Spirit, will produce fruits worthy of repentance and faith. Long before anyone can choose the Lord, the God of salvation has chosen them, as the hymn confesses,

"Tis not that I did choose Thee,  
for, Lord, that could not be;  
This heart would still refuse Thee  
Hads't Thou not chosen me...!"

#### ***The Call To Self-Examination***

With this the conclusion of the matter on Christ, the kingdom and the law.

No kingdom without law; apart from this it becomes divided against itself as the nations today so clearly demonstrate. But what is needed is the fulfillment of the promise of having "the law inscribed upon the tablets of the heart." And this happens only when, under the preaching of the gospel, the Spirit works the new birth from above.

Therefore all within our Lord's hearing are to search out themselves. Their "righteousness" which is the chief characteristic of that kingdom must "exceed" that of their religious leaders. Outward obedience, no matter how precise and apparently perfect in form, will satisfy a holy, just and righteous God. This obedience is not a matter of "quantity" but of "quality!"

And soon, as Jesus continues his sermon, the people must begin to realize how hard it is to enter the kingdom of heaven; far harder than keeping straight all those traditions of the scribes. The gate is narrow; and few shall be they who would truly find it. Our only hope is God's way of salvation -

offerings for the temple and the priesthood. But giving to the poor was to come first. Ideally - and the God of the covenant stated that emphatically - there should never have been any poor in the land. By his servant Joshua He apportioned to every family its property for their livelihood. And when difficulties arose, the land could be sold but only temporarily. In the year of Jubilee it was always to be returned to its original owners or their descendants.

But soon - we learn from Israel's history - the poor were oppressed and deprived of a living because of the greed of others. Also for those social sins - read especially the prophet Amos - the winds of God's judgment swept the people of Israel from their land. Nor with changing circumstances did those who returned always receive back their lands. But the poor could be and were helped by the gifts of food, clothing and money. Many, especially among the Pharisees, spoiled their giving in God's sight by seeking the praise of men. And some, like the Pharisee in the parable, loudly advertised their piety in the temple courts.

Here Jesus rebukes all such giving. Soon the spirit of pride takes deep root to bear the poisonous fruit of self-righteousness. Let it be done "in secret," says He. Only then does God see, approve and reward richly.

### *On Prayer*

Prayer, both private and public in temple and synagogue, was one of the chief exercises in which the Jews in our Lord's days engaged. Every day at nine and noon, and again at three there were stated hours of prayer. Often those living in Jerusalem made a point of entering the temple for this spiritual exercise. Others like many religious leaders did this on the street corners. But any who engaged in it "to be seen of men" Jesus calls a "hypocrite." Such people wear a "false face," putting on a good show so that their piety will be highly praised by others.

5. What is wrong with the notion that first we must "believe" and then God will give us a "new heart" (regeneration)? Can you prove this from Scripture?

6. Can you really sing "O, how love I Thy law; it is my meditation day and night" from the heart? Why is God's law necessary for our Christian life and growth in godliness?

7. Describe both our Lord's passive and active obedience as the fulfillment of the law for our salvation? Does this give excuse for any sin on our part?

8. What do you understand by "righteousness?"

6. Should we give away our clothes to anyone who asks, lend to everyone in need?

7. Describe the kind of "love" which God requires of us. Why is it so hard to love in this way?

8. The Bible also teaches that love "covers a multitude of sins." Does this mean we should go "easy" on the sins of ourselves and others? What about using harsh words or excusing sexual sins in the name of love?

All this makes keeping the law such a serious business. Jesus does not offer us an easy way out, as if our words and deeds are now of little account. Rather, obedience becomes hard, even impossible for us to keep any commandments perfectly. And when we see this clearly, we grow in cultivating the true characteristics of kingdom citizens more eagerly. Not to "earn" salvation, for our trust is in Christ's righteousness alone. But in thankfulness which always delights our heavenly Father.

### *Look Deeply Into Your Heart Now*

The first example in keeping God's law to please him cuts to the heart of the matter. It deals with life, which is so cheaply esteemed in our day.

Our Lord speaks of it "murder," a deliberate and often premeditated form of killing. God indeed, allowed animals to be killed for food to supplement our diet. He also established government armed with the power of the sword to safeguard life. But who of us ever murdered?

But listen to the Lord Jesus now. See how He probes the depths of our hearts. He speaks about anger, about calling someone a "nit-wit" or even worse a "worthless fool" who is unfit to live any longer. Here He exposes the "seeds" from which murder can easily spring up. All these are in danger of God's punishment even to hell fire. Not only deeds but fully as much our words and our feelings are weighed in the balances. So, Christian, pray daily, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer." (Ps. 19:14)

Much the same holds true on the law for sexual purity. What a tough one in this day and age for adults as well as youth. Never may we excuse any kind of fornication or adultery, which corrupts the lives of individuals and destroys the fabric of society. Again, our Lord points to the source

from evil and evil-doers. But far more serious, if our Lord ordered "non-violence" for everyone and everywhere, He would be contradicting the plain commandments of God. What He does forbid is all personal enmity and taking of revenge while leaving the authority structures instituted by the sovereign God intact.

### *Love Which Is The Bond Of Perfectness*

No commandment is purely negative. Instead, the negative is intended to make full room for the positive. And that is "love" to God and our fellowmen always and everywhere.

Far too quickly is this forgotten. Some, by not committing physical adultery suppose they are fulfilling their marriage vows even though they abuse wife or children in word or deed. So too, those who never kill a fly or say nasty things about their neighbor. But our Lord exposes sharply the "hollowness" of all such lives. In fact, these people become law-breakers of the worst kind by keeping the "letter" while killing the "spirit" of God's will.

To make that unavoidably plain Jesus underscores the patterns for kingdom citizens. Already He did this in part by speaking about "cloaks" and "second miles" and "lending." Now He commands love for our enemies, prayer for those who persecute us; and being "perfect" in all we feel and think and do. Only so will we become more like our heavenly Father who showers his gifts on the godly and the ungodly alike. By imitating God himself we show the marks of being his children ever more clearly. Such perfection, indeed, is not attainable on this side of the grave. Yet we are commanded to strive without ceasing for it. And in this struggle we are comforted by Christ's "righteousness" to cover our imperfections and the Spirit's "indwelling power" to work grace in all those who ask.

2. The word "fool," slipping easily across our lips, actually means "scoundrel, worthless one." Why are we forbidden to make such a judgment, especially about fellow Christians?

3. How and why, do you think, sexual sins are so prevalent today?

4. Do you warn yourself and your family and friends against television shows and movies with their loose morality?

5. Show how our Catechism, explaining the Decalogue, exposes all sins in their depth.

6. How can we avoid being "legalistic" in our understanding of kingdom living?

7. Discuss with each other our "righteousness in Christ." What strength should this give you?







**Lesson 1**  
**And Jesus Came... Preaching!**

*"Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the good news of the kingdom..."*

- Matthew 4:23

**SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 4:23 - 5:1**

Seldom had the land of Palestine been so stirred as when our Lord Jesus carried out his public ministry. Shortly after his baptism, accredited by the Father from heaven, He went throughout the land to fulfill his high calling. And by the second year - when the Sermon on the Mount was to be preached - his popularity was at its greatest. From every part of the country multitudes from every class in society came to see and hear him; also the Jewish leaders who realized that their influence on the common folk was growing weaker...

***The Setting Of This Sermon***

Sermons, and this account is a helpful reminder, require a setting. This is not first of all something physical, as if a church building is needed. At times a marketplace; occasionally even a house with only a few listeners. And for outreach, when done properly, use can be made of radio and television to reach those who otherwise might not hear.

What is always required is a "preacher" and an "audience." Even more, the preacher must be prepared; none of this "off-the-top-of-my-hat" stuff. And the more the audience has prepared itself to come, the more effective a sermon usually will be. That may well explain this introduction to the Sermon on the Mount.

This was by no means the first time Jesus came preaching. Already He had been very active. Not only in Galilee

cloudbursts - not at all unusual in Palestine - then the strength and safety of each "building" was tested. The "foolish" had been building without careful thought for what could and often did happen. The "wise" took every possible danger into serious consideration in their choice.

Of course, our Lord is not giving advice on earthly house construction. His message is one to challenge all who have heard or are now hearing his words. And that each day anew we are building our lives - in every activity of family and society, of school and church, of work and play - on foundations of one of these two kinds. And we had better know as clearly and consistently as possible what we are doing. Only the life built solidly upon the rock will abide through life's storms and stresses and that forever.

That "Rock" - dare you doubt this now? - is our Lord Jesus Christ in his person and work. Let me end with the little chorus we learned already as children,

"Only one life,  
it will soon be past.  
Only what's done for Christ  
will always last!"

**For Reflection And Discussion**

1. Why do many, when hearing the Gospel sound, still choose the wide gate and the broad way?
  
2. How can you and I be sure that we have found the "narrow gate?" What makes it so difficult find this? Are parents, teachers or preachers to blame if we don't find it? Or are we?

Preaching in the biblical sense is not everybody's job. A man must be "called" by God himself. That persuasion must fill his entire being. He is to exemplify the word of God in his daily conduct. And since we can easily deceive ourselves, a preacher needs the approval of a church which lives by the word. Self-appointed preachers have often been like a cancer in the world and a judgment or curse for those who follow them.

Our Lord, in distinction from every preacher before and after His coming, received the highest credentials. He was sent by the Father into the world to be a preacher in word and deed, even to his death on the cross. He was publicly installed by God into that "office" at his baptism. He fully passed the test when tempted by Satan in the desert. And filled with the Spirit, His words and deeds brought life and health and peace. That is why the Father said, "This is my Son, whom I love, with him I am well-pleased." Therefore He spoke with authority like no one else. We therefore must listen to Him closely and carefully and now also to every preacher who faithfully proclaims the Jesus of Holy Scripture as the only Savior among mankind.

### **For Reflection And Discussion**

1. What does the name "Jesus" mean to you? How would you describe "salvation?"

2. How are teaching and preaching distinguished? Can we have one without the other in our churches today? (cf. Matt. 28:16-20)

and more pleasant to travel. What our Lord emphasizes is the difficulty of living the Christ-controlled life. And this message is far from popular in our day. It demands self-denial. It demands cross-bearing in which our old and sinful self dies slowly and always painfully. It demands following Jesus in thought, word and deed. All this has been unmistakably set forth in his sermon. Here is no room at all for anyone to say, 'I'm okay and you're okay too?'

So decisive is the right choice that it alone leads to "life." The other? Well, on that our Lord will soon, in his concluding words, have much more to say.

### ***Warn Yourself Every Day Against Being Deceived***

The first command leads immediately and necessarily to the second.

How well Jesus knew the "folly" so easily pursued by many in his day. And certainly such folly has not disappeared in the centuries which followed. Also now, in their eagerness to hear only what feeds their pride and pleases their feelings, many are being misdirected and misled.

Here He speaks a word of warning against "false prophets." Many, as also the apostles insisted, had gone and are still going out to serve themselves in deceiving the ignorant and the inattentive. By far the most dangerous are those who "come in sheep's clothing." They claim to be speaking as ambassadors of the Lord Jesus. Like sheep they will bleat words of ease which please. But in reality they are "ravenous wolves," insatiably hungry for fame and fortune. About them He did not mince any words! Would you learn to know them and their activities in greater detail? Simply read carefully the epistle of Jude and the second letter of Peter. Not popular reading today, when people have so little taste for "the sound doctrine which is unto godliness."

**Lesson 2**  
**Are We Citizens Of God's Kingdom?**

*"...and he began to teach them, saying; 'Blessed are...'"*  
- Matthew 5:1b, 2a

**SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 5: 2 - 10**

Are you surprised at the way in which our Lord begins this sermon? Here is no story to catch attention. Nor does He first set forth doctrines to be believed and patterns of life to be followed. Instead, He in a most personal way directs the attention of each and everyone to themselves.

***Let's Pause For A Moment Or Two***

Our Lord has left the town where He was with his disciples. Soon mothers with children left their homes. Merchants closed shop and fishermen who saw him passing by left their ships and nets. Quite a mixed gathering, old and young, as well as men, women and children with also a few religious leaders of the Jews. Expectations, whether for good or ill, must have been running high. And like a sharp two-edged sword He will use his words to pierce their hearts.

He sits down on a hillside, likely so that his voice may carry well to the multitude.

And He "began to teach." Ponder these words carefully. A famous American educator once said, "Learning takes place with a teacher and a pupil on a log with a book between." Our Lord, however, took no book along here but was himself "the open book of God" to teach all who would listen how to be well-pleasing to God. Even when often He quoted Holy Scripture, He points to himself as the fulfillment of all God's words!

Perhaps you have a bit of problem with the words here. Did Jesus really "teach" all in this audience? After all, mention

5. In what sense are the "kingdom treasures" (name a few) also holy? Can we speak to each other about them too casually and carelessly?

6. How does this section on prayer reinforce every part of the Lord's Prayer?

7. How do you respond when the God of the covenant does not seem to give you what you ask?

8. And, finally, why and how must "trust" and "obey" always go hand-in-hand in our lives? Can the one ever be right without the other?

"persecuted." Not a pleasant prospect, is it? Yet without this we are not citizens of the heavenly kingdom in truth! Compare, then, these characteristics with those who have no willingness to be taught and transformed by Christ's words.

### For Reflection And Discussion

1. What does it mean to be a "disciple?"
2. Why do you think Jesus begins here with the characteristics rather than with the duties of kingdom citizens?
3. Is there some kind of order in the several characteristics listed here? How does the one seem to follow so well from the first, the second, etc.?
4. What does the Bible mean by being "meek?" Are such people colorless push-overs for everybody? In what sense was Jesus meek?
5. Can anybody ever "see God?" What does Jesus say about this in John 14?

But you ask, 'Doesn't the Bible tell us that we are to judge?' Certainly as parents and teachers and friends. But be careful, very careful indeed. Deal with the wrong word or deeds, not with the heart of the person and that harshly. Notice how our Lord patiently applies this rule for kingdom citizens. First take note of and judge yourself. With that you will choke any self-righteousness and pride in yourself. And remember don't use Scripture - that which is "sacred" - so lightly. Like "dogs" those whom you correct may snarl and bite you. And its "pearls" are too precious to throw to the "swine" who stamp them underfoot as useless. Lack of common sense, also here, often does the cause of Christ untold harm.

### *In Our Relationship To The Heavenly Father*

By this time our Lord's audience - at least those who were listening and learning - must have wondered how anyone could ever keep God's law in a well-pleasing way. And that is one of the chief functions and purposes for every good sermon. Even as committed believers we like "to feel so good about ourselves." Rarely will we go to the dentist or the doctor, unless we feel something may be quite wrong. So it is also with the Sermon on the Mount. Anyone supposing himself good enough in God's sight soon makes a mockery of prayer. Seeking God and the righteousness of the kingdom is for those who feel their deep need. Before judging others, they already are judging and condemning themselves for their failings. They "mourn" before the face of their God. They "hunger and thirst for a righteousness" which is not their own. And so they call upon him for grace to walk in the appointed way. Only that is steering the safe and steady course through life every day.

What a blessed encouragement the Lord Jesus gives every believer. Simply "ask" and "seek" and "knock." And keep on doing this, for the heavenly Father is always willing and able to give that which is truly good for us.

### Lesson 3

#### Straight Talk From The Saviour's Lips

*"In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."*

- Matthew 5:16

**SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 5:11 - 16**

Almost without exception people love their ease and pleasure. And the last one hundred years have made this far more possible by way of many inventions. Whether people use and enjoy all of these is, of course, quite another matter.

In religion, too, people are usually looking for the ease which will please. So did the Jews in the days of our Lord. They hoped that somehow soon all their troubles would vanish like bubbles by getting rid of those bad Romans who made their lives so miserable. After all, weren't they God's own people? What they forgot, however, was that far more important than changing outward circumstances was a change which their own hearts and lives needed.

To this Jesus now directs their attention! All that He was saying - not just the promises He had mentioned - had to be applied first and foremost to their own lives personally. And when they did this, they would as "peacemakers" also suffer persecution. Soon his "disciples" did experience that this distress was inescapable. And how they responded would demonstrate whether or not they were truly citizens of the kingdom of heaven. The response which our Lord seeks is a threefold one.

#### *Rejoicing*

The first which Jesus requires of his people when persecuted is to "rejoice."

### Lesson 9

#### Keeping Our Life On A Steady Course

*"So whatever you want that men should do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets."*

- Matthew 7:12

**SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 7:1 - 12**

At first reading the two sections here hardly seem to belong together. But soon, upon thoughtful reflection, we find that they really do. Both deal with all of life - with ourselves, our fellow-men and God as our heavenly Father - in a very decisive way. Here the Lord Jesus is leading up to his conclusion. As He does this, we soon begin to realize how much we need the forgiving and renewing grace of God.

#### *In Our Relationship To Self And Others*

Our Lord is speaking first about that very prevalent sin of judging others harshly. And "judging" - how well we know that from Scripture - is a very serious and for us a most dangerous business. Far too quickly what we call a light criticism or a necessary rebuke is an unfair and harsh judgment of another person. Because they have hurt us or done something wrong, we call them very wicked and unworthy of our love. We condemn not the word or deed but the person himself.

By doing that, often thoughtlessly and in anger, we try to stand in God's place; who alone is the true Lawgiver and the Judge. And by that we destroy the love we should show. And in self-righteous pride we who also sin so often are "hypocrites." And Jesus says that by such judging we are in danger of God's judgment!

Note well how our Lord - be it briefly - describes this terrible sin.

## ***Remembering***

Closely connected with the above is what our Lord now teaches. He reminds his disciples of their position, of "what" they really are in the midst of a world which has no love for Christ and his message of salvation.

They are "the salt of the earth." Each granule seems so small, doesn't it? But what a wholesome power salt really packs. It flavors food which otherwise would be tasteless. It prevents decay. It has a healing effect on wounds which are infected. But salt does little good as long as it stays in a box or a salt shaker! It must come into contact with that which it is supposed to improve. No animals or people cannot live long without it. Years ago when Arab traders carried it across the deserts to salt-deprived parts Africa, they were often paid with an equal weight in gold!

But if salt becomes tasteless, it is worthless. That happens when it is mixed with other ingredients like sand. So, too, when the Gospel is compromised with worldly words and deeds, it loses its true taste and becomes worthless. Fit only, says Jesus, to be thrown away and trampled underfoot.

Much the same is said by our Lord about his disciples as "light." All of us can mention six or more blessings which light provides. It cheers the soul. It drives away darkness with its dangers. It has healing powers. It enables us to move about and work far more easily. It also shows where the dangers lie for our lives. Therefore Christians are "to shine." Few are quite so worthless in God's world as those "secret" believers who try to hide who they are and what they believe. Remember at the same time that all the "light" we possess is a gift of God's grace. It is not ours to be used foolishly; much less as if we ourselves are shining so brightly. Rather, it is Christ as the Light of the world shining upon and within us. That is how He also shines through us to spread his life-sustaining light in a dark and dismal world.

doing all this we are stop worrying about anything at all! Our lives are in the perfect hands of the Father who loves us for Christ his dear Son's sake. How well Paul reminds us of this. First of all, that we are "to cast all our cares upon God, for He cares for us." And then, what sometimes is far from easy, to learn "to be content in whatever condition we find ourselves."

Often life seems so stressful and stormy. But that is a fact in every Christian's experience while on earth. There will be pains and persecutions; temptations and trials and troubles of several kinds. Soon we experience the loss of loved ones and at times the open enmity of those who live for this world and its pleasures. But without this our faith in God and his rich promises will never grow strong. When troubles do come our way, then always remember that He remains in full control and will safely see us through to his praise and our peace. So when life's load seems so heavy or the days seem so dark, confess your trust in the Father by singing,

"When peace like a river attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea-billows roll;  
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say -  
It is well, it is well with my soul."

Such faith is the true mark of kingdom citizenship.  
Such faith is the victory which overcomes the world!

## **For Reflection And Discussion**

1. Why do you suppose Jesus also here places both the negative and the positive together? Can we ever have the one without the other?

3. What special "blessedness" does such suffering give?

4. Discuss this business of being "salt." Show how compromising with worldly theories and sinful practices compromises and contaminates the Gospel and so makes such messages worthless.

5. Especially when Jews or Muslims become believers in Jesus, they suffer much for their faith and are in danger of being killed. How can they still be "salt" and "light?"

6. What according to the Bible are "good deeds?" In what way are our deeds often tainted with sin? Are they then completely worthless?

7. Can unbelievers do any "good deeds" at all? Explain very carefully here.

### *First Of All, By Laying Up Treasure In Heaven*

"Treasure" is what our Lord is talking about. While that includes money, it comes in many other forms as well. A treasure is anyone or anything which has our first and highest priority. It is what we deem most important and valuable of all. And that can be ourselves, our family or friends, our pleasures or our profits or even the praise of men. All these, no matter how necessary and pleasant they may be for a time, are foundations to be swept away in time. As with all earthly goods and relationships, they pass away.

But you now ask, what about that treasure in heaven? Heaven is so far away. How can we "lay up" anything there?

By this time we should be able to answer well. For kingdom citizens the first and only lasting treasure is our relationship to the God of salvation through Jesus Christ. And only what we do to strengthen and perfect that relationship - right in our everyday life - is worthwhile. It alone lasts forever and ever. Such "laying up" is being recorded in heaven by God himself. Even every kindly word, every prayer for someone else, every cup of cold water to cheer a person in the sorrows and struggles of life. And never seeking the praise of men; only and always for Jesus' sake. Of course, that takes a great deal of self-denial. Into such living we can grow only by watching unto prayer.

What our Lord adds here is "commentary." He calls attention to the "eye" which is to be single-minded. This means looking up to God as we seek to do his will. Only so will our lives be filled with the "light" which Jesus shines in us by his word and Spirit. No room here for compromise. Don't try to serve two masters - God and yourself with the world - at the same time. Such compromise leads to endless confusion. Unless repented of, it will produce a death from which there is no deliverance.

ments of God. As the second Adam ( ), He in perfect obedience to the heavenly father would set straight what Adam had corrupted by disobedience and with this earn the "righteousness" which alone pleases God for all who believed in him. And this, as the gospels so repeatedly emphasize, those religious leaders and many who followed them felt they did not need. Were they not Abraham's children, heirs by covenantal descent worthy of that kingdom? For them no substitute, no second Adam, was necessary. Not He but they were the obedient children of God.

Now reflect for a moment how seriously our Lord took the whole of God's law. "Not an iota, not a jot" would pass away until all was fulfilled. And although this is further explained in the gospels and the epistles, already here the issue is stated clearly.

### ***A Much-Needed Warning***

Our Lord continues his discourse aimed at the self-righteous. Relaxation even the least of any of God's commandments, whether in teaching or in practice, makes a person "least" in that kingdom, unworthy of its blessedness. Only perfect obedience and that from the heart is acceptable in the sight of the God of the covenant.

Here we do well to ponder for a while on the place of God's law in the kingdom of heaven. No one can enter it by way of any work-righteousness. All have sinned and fallen short of God's will for their lives. And every Israelite could and should have remembered this! It was so often repeated throughout the Old Testament, by word and even more by examples of many kinds. For true obedience is only found when the heart is renewed from within. Here Abraham's life - and they prided themselves on being his descendants - demonstrated how by faith alone he could obey. And that faith is a matter of the

2. Are we really giving "in secret" when collections are taken in an open plate and the deacons keep careful record of our cheques and envelope gifts? Explain.

3. Why may only true believers pray the Lord's Prayer? And why always in the first person plural - our, us - not I or me or my?

4. How does our Catechism explain "Thy kingdom come?" How can we become more aware of this in our daily lives?

5. How well can you explain the various parts of the Lord's Prayer? Have you learned not only to recite it but also to model your personal prayers by it?

6. Why do the Muslims fast during the month of Ramadan? Why do many Jews also fast? Should we have times of fasting in our lives? Explain your answer.

7. Is every long prayer offered in church or by ourselves wrong?

8. Do our prayers often sound like "a grocery list" of what we think we need? How much adoration and praise is there in your prayers?



confessing Jesus as Saviour and Lord and by faith being "united" to him in his death on the cross, his burial and his resurrection with the power unto a new and holy life in him. Not Jesus, but rather the religious leaders, were easy-going with the perfect law of our God! A lesson to be remembered every day, lest we too become careless and so fail to find entrance into the kingdom of heaven.

### For Reflection And Discussion

1. What do you understand by God's law? Only the Ten Commandments? Explain.
2. Who were the scribes; who the Pharisees? Why are they usually linked together?
3. What is meant by "iota" and "jot?"
4. What does the Bible mean by our "heart?" Can you show how our mind (thoughts) and will (decisions) and affections (feelings) flow from what kind of heart we have?

Again the command comes to pray to the Father "in secret." But this is no prohibition of family, social or congregational prayers, all of which have a definitely public character. Our Lord places the emphasis on the inward motive of the heart. Are our prayers a genuine turning to God who alone can hear and answer and bless? And with this, another sharp arrow from Christ's bow to pierce the hearts of all who want people to hear them pray. He also rebukes those who suppose that only long and effusive prayers will receive the desired answer. That, says He, is what the heathen do! Ah, how well our Lord knows the sins to which his followers can be exposed.

Thus He provides a pattern for the prayer-life of all who are kingdom citizens. All who reject the command to repent and believe on the Lord Jesus for salvation have no right to take these precious words upon their lips!

Hardly for a Reformed church should the Lord's Prayer need any detailed explanation here. In a most effective, pastoral and practical way we find this in our Catechism. Read and reflect thoughtfully on what it says about this. Our Lord does not order an endless repetition of these words, as if each phrase is "a holy bead to be fondled over and over again." Nor does this teaching demand that each prayer of ours must include all the "dimensions" taught here.

But every part deserves our scrupulous attention. Are we truly seeking "first" the glory of God and the coming of his kingdom? Are we eager that his blessed will may be done by ourselves and others as cheerfully as do heaven's angels? And in asking for his forgiveness, do we from the heart forgive those who sin against us? We only deceive ourselves if we think God will overlook the anger, the bitterness and enmity, which we refuse to forsake.

## Lesson 5

### Living According To The Kingdom-Style

*"You have heard that it was said to people long ago... but I tell you..."*

- Matthew 5:21a, 22a

**SCRIPTURE:** MATTHEW 5:21 - 32

What an unusual, what a marvelous Teacher is the Lord Jesus. Not only does He always speak clearly and uncompromisingly; He applies his instruction emphatically to our daily life and conduct. For kingdom citizens there is no escape from its impact. Glittering generalities - even when true to basic principles - are of little help. Often they fall like water off a duck's back.

#### *Learning From The Lord Jesus*

Here, then, our Lord explains how that law is to function in our lives. This He does by way of several examples. In each case note how sharply He distinguishes his teaching not from that given by God at Mount Sinai but from those detailed rules of the scribes and Pharisees.

He alone fully understands and explains the law correctly, for that law was written upon his heart! In no sense is He laying down "new" laws, for He came to fulfill the "righteousness of the law" by his perfect obedience to his Father. And what He teaches here is of the greatest importance for every kingdom citizen. Without fulfilling the "spirit" the law, obedience is purely mechanical; no more than a dead letter. External obedience alone destroys its very purpose of molding our inward character to make us more pleasing to God who revealed it for our good. Unless we observe its precepts with love for God and others, we are "hypocrites." That it is like wearing a mask, a false face to deceive self and others but never God.

## Lesson 7

### The Only Piety Which Pleases The Lord

*"Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen of them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven."*

- Matthew 6:1

**SCRIPTURE:** MATTHEW 6:1 - 17

The God of the covenant - our heavenly Father in Christ Jesus - is the Lord of all truth. Nothing does He hate more than lies, which are the devil's tools. In the word "truth" is always the idea of faithfulness or loyalty. As the one true God He remains eternally true to himself, ever faithful to his word and his people. And his truth we are to practice in loyalty to him and our fellow men. Without it every relationship in life begins to unravel and finally breaks down completely.

It is well for us to reflect deeply on this before turning to the lesson for today. It concerns our "piety," those religious activities and exercises which are so much a part of every Christian life. Here the Lord Jesus, continuing the Sermon on the Mount, exposes and condemns all sham, pretense and hypocrisy. Although the scribes and Pharisees of that day fell under his judgment, let us not forget that their sins can crouch at the door of our hearts. It sneaks in when we are careless. Here first a general principle and then a threefold application. Even the most God-approved exercise in godliness (1 Tim. 4:4) can be performed with wrong motives!

#### *On Almsgiving*

Among the Jews who listened to God's laws regarding the poor and oppressed the giving of alms was a large part of their religion. Of course, there were the "tithes" and other

from which such evils spring. Anything, even lustful looks which arise so easily in our sex-saturated society stand condemned in God's sight. And this being true, we do well to guard our thoughts and looks awaked by smutty jokes, television dramas and the magazines we read. Listen to what James has to say about sin within us. "For each man is tempted and lured by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death." (James 1:14, 15) To which our Lord adds a sharp word on divorce, which already was common-place among many Jews in His day and is taken even more lightly in ours.

Are you discouraged now? Indeed, in so far as we see ourselves or, like many people, try to make ourselves perfect. But the law as Jesus explains its observance aims at driving us to seek Christ's righteousness to cover all our sins. That never means taking it easy. Instead, let our Catechism describe kingdom citizens. It pours Gilead's balm into sin-smitten but believing hearts.

"...for even the holiest men, while in this life, have only a small beginning of this obedience, yet so that with earnest purpose they begin to live, not only according to some, but according to all the commandments of God."

Such is spiritual life in Christ to strengthen us as we test ourselves by the Sermon on the Mount.

### **For Reflection And Discussion**

1. Is all anger equally sinful? Doesn't Paul command, "Be angry and sin not?" Explain.

### **For Reflection And Discussion**

1. Why are the half-truths of the loose-lipped and the legalists so dangerous to spiritual growth in our lives? How should preachers also warn against these?

2. What is "taking an oath?" When, how and why may and should we take an oath?

3. Why is God so "jealous" of his name and its use? Explain the second commandment.

4. What should you say, when you hear someone take God's name "in vain?" Can we become guilty of this even while praying and singing his praises? So, should we stop singing?

5. How does anger easily lead to taking revenge? How does all this often "hurt" ourselves more than it does others?

**Lesson Six**  
**Patterns For Christian Perfection**

*"And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?"*

- Matthew 5:47

**SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 5:33 - 48**

To his disciples and the multitude the Lord Jesus has already spoken much about how kingdom citizens are to live everyday, beginning first with their relationship to others. But more, far more is still to come. Here He adds two more illustrations from God's law and ends with love, which is the bond of perfectness.

***Guard Against Any Misrepresentation***

It is important to realize that the Sermon on the Mount, also in the light of the rest of Scripture, is so easily and often misunderstood and applied. And that especially in three ways.

First of all, there are the "loose-lipped." Often you can find them next to you in church. And quickly you and I can slip into their ways. They shout loudly, "Hallelujah, Jesus saves. I neither can or need do anything except believe." Sounds so biblical, doesn't it? Until we realize that such speaking soon leads to a very careless attitude to God's law for his people. They forget that not only is Christ's righteousness fulfilled for us; it is also to be fulfilled more and more in us. Without that ongoing change we dishonor God, deceive ourselves and imperil our salvation. Such living has lost all its "salt" and sheds no true "light."

There are also the "literalists," about whom we will have more to say. Since Jesus taught us to swear no oaths and to resist no evil, they take this precisely for any and every

situation, failing to compare Scripture with Scripture. They forget that here Christ is speaking about our attitude and conduct as individuals without forbidding every oath or all use of force. Had He done that, He would contradict the very laws which He came to fulfill perfectly.

And then there are the "legalists." They vainly try to obey God's will by their own efforts instead by the grace which Christ gives by his Holy Spirit. At all costs they want to make themselves "worthy" before they dare believe they are saved. That's like putting the cart before the horse. All three of these perversions of our Savior's teachings are dead-end alleys.

***Two Further Illustrations***

Here first on oaths. The Jews of that day were very free in their use of these solemn promises made without keeping them. And that is what our Lord warns against. So strongly, indeed, that He insists that our very word should be our bond. Unless we mean what we are saying in promises to God and others, we dishonor the very name of our God. All such easy-going swearing brings down God's judgment. So does swearing by the temple or the holy city or one's own head, those clever ways by which the scribes taught the people to avoid getting into trouble with God.

But Jesus also has much to say about getting-even with others. Often believers can be tempted to take the law into their own hands. Against this He warns his hearers sternly. Here the "literalists" get themselves into great difficulties. If all use of force is forbidden, then parents may inflict no punishments, policemen will not be able to control the crowd or take prisoners, and the nation cannot preserve its independence when attacked. Such were, in theory at least, the views of the Russian Tolstoy and the Indian nationalist Gandhi. Sounds so kind and pious if this were a world free