



grow. pray. study.

March 12, 2023, *The Sermon on the Mount*

Jesus' "topsy-turvy" idea of a good life

**MONDAY 3.13.23 Matthew 5:1-16**

Translators usually choose either "blessed" or "happy" for *makarios*, the Greek word Matthew used to represent Jesus' Aramaic teaching. Scholar N. T. Wright said it meant "wonderful news," explaining, "These 'blessings', the 'wonderful news' he's announcing, are not saying 'try hard to live like this.' They are saying that people who already are like that are in good shape. They should be happy and celebrate." \* These "beatitudes" were about life in which God reigns, not our ordinary human life.

- "Jesus' words may seem strange since he regards as 'blessed' or 'happy' those who are usually regarded as...unfortunate....this alerts us to the topsy-turvy nature of Jesus' teaching....'Hopeless' (or 'poor in spirit') refers to those who continue to look to God for help in the midst of their present, needy state." \*\* What helps you keep looking to God's world no matter how good or (more often) bad that day's news headlines feel to you?
- Scholar William Barclay wrote, people "are to see our good deeds. In Greek, there are two words for good. There is... *agathos* which simply defines a thing as good in quality; there is *kalos* which means that a thing is not only good, but also winsome and beautiful and attractive. The word used here is *kalos*." \*\*\* Are there times when you feel like hiding your "light" (God's presence in your life) under a basket? Prayerfully choose one attractive way you'll shine your light toward others.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, in this darkened, lonely, hurting world, make me more and more transparent so that your light can shine out of me like a beacon, spreading love, grace and peace. Amen.

\* Wright, N.T., *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15* (The New Testament for Everyone) (p. 36). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

\*\* Eugene Eung-Chun Park and Joel B. Green, study note on Matthew 5:1-3 in *The CEB Study Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013, p. 12 NT.

\*\*\* William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of Matthew—Volume 1 Chapters 1–10* (Revised Edition). Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976, p. 125.

## The ethics of Jesus' kingdom

### TUESDAY 3.13.23 Matthew 5:17-48

Jesus' words may surprise you. Many Christians think Jesus did come to abolish "the law." Scholar N. T. Wright said, "Jesus wasn't intending to abandon the law and the prophets. Israel's whole story, commands, promises and all, was going to come true in him.... a way was opening up... to make God's covenant a reality... changing behavior not just by teaching but by a change of heart and mind itself." \* Jesus challenged a misuse of "law" that had taken a deep hold on his day's religious leaders.

- The Old Testament prophets said, often, that God cares about the inner spirit driving our acts far more than any outer show of piety (see [Isaiah 1:10–15](#); [Jeremiah 6:20](#); [Amos 5:21–24](#)). Jesus hadn't come to "do away with" the law. He'd come to apply the law to the true source of both good and bad: our (often hidden) inner self. When have you realized that your outward behavior did not match what was inside you? How has Jesus changed your heart and mind for the better?
- Jesus spoke to anger, faithlessness, falsehood, revenge, and love's significance. John Wesley (Methodism's founder) said Jesus called us to be "perfect in love," ever more loving with God's all-inclusive love. He rejected the idea that "perfect" meant never "sinning" (missing the mark). How does it challenge you to see "perfect" as about your inner self rather than just your visible actions? How can you more fully live with God's generosity toward even "unrighteous" people?

**Prayer:** Eternal God, you were with Israel's King David when he wrote "you want truth in the most hidden places" (Psalm 51:6). You taught that in the Sermon on the Mount. Now plant your truth deep inside me. Amen.

\* Wright, N. T. *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15* (The New Testament for Everyone) (p. 41). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

## Habits that link us to God

### WEDNESDAY 3.15.23 Matthew 6:1-18

#### Did You Know?

The most familiar Lord's Prayer says, at the end of verse 13 "for yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory, Amen." Few recent English versions include that, because the phrase is not in any of the oldest existing manuscripts of Matthew. The 1611 *King James Version* couldn't consider those older manuscripts--they hadn't been found yet. The reverent benediction doesn't seem to have been part of the original gospel text. "These words were probably added to Matthew's text when Jesus' prayer became more and more a part of the church's worship." \*

Imagine hiring a bugler to sound a pompous fanfare just before you put your big gift ("for the poor") into a Temple offering box. Jesus' clear warning: you can do a good thing for the wrong reasons. God can tell the difference, whether people can or not. Matthew set Jesus' model prayer in the Sermon on the Mount; Luke wrote about the prayer in a different setting (cf. [Luke 11:1-4](#)). Jesus must have often taught this prayer. He taught his disciples (all of us) how to speak with God simply yet profoundly.

- As Jesus taught about various spiritual practices, he never used the word "if." In today's passage, he said "whenever you give alms [gifts to the poor]," "whenever you pray," even "whenever you fast." As scholar N. T. Wright put it, Jesus "assumes that people will continue to do all of these. What matters is learning to do them simply to and for God himself." \*\* What are the regular practices ("holy habits") that most open your heart and draw you closer to God?
- "Fasting" most often means giving up food for 12 or 24 hours, and using mealtimes for prayer and Scripture study. (Note: for medical reasons, some people—notably pregnant women—should not fast from food without a doctor's guidance. Christians may also "fast" from their smartphone or other cherished activities rather than food.) How can this, like giving money or devoting time to worship, reinforce your commitment to make God your highest priority?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, it can sound so obvious: "Prayer is talking to God." Keep me growing so that I value my connection with you more highly than any other aspect of my life. Amen.

\* Eugene Eung-Chun Park and Joel B. Green, study note on Matthew 5:13 in *The CEB Study Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013, p. 16 NT. For a fuller study, see Hamilton, Adam, *The Lord's Prayer* (chapter 6). Abingdon Press.

\*\* Wright, N.T., *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15* (The New Testament for Everyone) (p. 55). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

## Keeping your treasure truly secure

### THURSDAY 3.16.23 Matthew 6:19-34

Jesus' teaching echoed the ancient Hebrew sages' wisdom: eagerly amassing this world's "treasures" does not produce a "secure" life (cf. [Proverbs 14:22, 21:20](#)). Sadly, many religious leaders in Jesus' day (and since) overlooked that part of their faith. Jesus also made the deeply practical yet often ignored point (verse 27) that worry doesn't actually solve problems or make our lives any longer or better. Jesus' point wasn't just spiritual "fluff"—there is research \* that validates it.

- Have you ever put money into something "experts" assured you was "secure," only to watch it prove insecure? So much, fine in itself, can use part of our "treasure"—vacations, all kinds of collectibles, prized possessions, tickets to special events, houses, vehicles, and retirement savings. Where is your heart? Do you put as much time and energy into "investing" in God's heavenly kingdom as in earthly investments and spending options?
- Scholar N. T. Wright said in Jesus' teaching "the point was...priorities. Put the world first, and you'll find it gets moth-eaten in your hands. Put God first, and you'll get the world thrown in.... Living totally without worry sounds, to many people, as impossible as living totally without breathing.... Here, at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, is an invitation that surprisingly few people even try to take up." \*\* Are you willing to try to take up Jesus' invitation not to worry?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you knew a cross waited for you, yet remarkably you spoke of peace, of not worrying. Fill me with your trusting peace in a broken world. Amen.

\* [Click here](#) to read an article by Don Joseph Goewey about the value of eliminating worry.

\*\* Wright, N.T., *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15* (The New Testament for Everyone) (pp. 66-67). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

## Building a life on the Golden Rule

### FRIDAY 3.17.23 Matthew 7:1-14

Matthew (Luke too—cf. [Luke 6:31](#)) said Jesus taught "the Golden Rule" ("In everything do to others as you would have them do to you"). Scholar William Barclay noted the breadth of Jesus' command: "The attitude which says, 'I must do no harm to people is quite different from the attitude which says, 'I must do my best to help people.'" \* "Don't judge" did not mean we should not evaluate people's actions carefully, especially harmful ones, but as we do, we must remember our limited knowledge.

- Jesus said the Golden Rule held the deep spiritual essence of "the Law and the Prophets." What people or conditions make it hardest for you to truly treat others as you wish they'd treat you? The Rule also applies to how you treat yourself. "In the same way, we are not to judge others harshly, we are to remove ourselves from relationships in which we are judged harshly." \*\* Are there any situations in which you need to remove yourself from someone else's harsh judgment?
- Jesus never gave in to the urge to promise an easy road. He said, "enter through the narrow gate" and "the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it." Jesus' path, though not always the most comfortable, is always best in the long run. When have you had to choose between one way that was easy but wrong, and another that was difficult but right? What did you decide?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, keep me healthily aware of my strengths while still being able to honestly "take the log out of [my] eye" before trying to correct or "improve" others. Amen.

\* William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of Matthew, vol. 1* (Revised Edition). Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976, p. 276.

\*\* Danielle Shroyer, reflection on Matthew 7 in *The CEB Women's Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016, p. 1221.

## **Jesus offers a stormproof life**

### **SATURDAY 3.18.23 Matthew 7:15-29**

John the Baptist challenged his hearers, notably the Jerusalem religious leaders, “Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives” (Matthew 3:7-8). Jesus expanded that, noting that we judge a fruit tree’s health not by its looks, but by the fruit it bears. The key spiritual reality is not how pious we look publicly, but whether our lives reflect the principles of God’s kingdom. Jesus pictured people on Judgment Day talking about prophesying in his name, casting out demons in his name, doing “mighty works” in his name—and yet hearing the tragic words, “I never knew you.” Older GPS readers may recall a pop song called “Yesterday When I was Young.” (Younger readers can ask their parents or grandparents about it.) It included these somber lines: “The thousand dreams I dreamed, the splendid things I planned, I always built, alas, on weak and shifting sand.” \* Jesus authoritatively called us to build our life on the rock of his kingdom’s enduring values, not on shifting sand.

- We often think of these verses mainly when we hear another story about a religious leader who has fallen short of integrity in sexual, financial or some other way. But Jesus' principle works the other way too. Are there people you have learned to trust more as you have seen the fruit of their life and work? What kind of “fruit” most helps and nourishes you? “It’s not even enough to name Jesus as Lord, or perform extraordinary activities (like throwing out demons or working miracles) in his name. What matters is that one put into practice in one’s life the true righteousness of which Jesus had spoken in Matthew 5:20.” \*\* How would you define the difference between showy outward “righteousness” and a life that puts “true righteousness” into practice inwardly as well as outwardly? It will rain in your life sooner or later. What are you doing daily to build the type of character that can weather life’s storms?

**Prayer:** King Jesus, I want you to rule in my heart, in my life. Reshape my values and beliefs until they truly form a firm foundation for living a life that honors you. Amen.

\* Writer(s): Charles Aznavour in French, Herbert Kretzmer in English. Copyright Charles Aznavour and Fred Ebb, from <https://www.metrolyrics.com/yesterday-when-i-was-young-lyrics-charles-aznavour.html>.

\*\* Eugene Eung-Chun Park and Joel B. Green, study note on Matthew 7:21-23 in *The CEB Study Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013, p. 18 NT.