

THE LIFE OF
JESUS



BOOK 2



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JESUS





BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

In the Bible, God reveals His truth about how to have eternal life by becoming a believer in the finished work of Jesus Christ. The believer is a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, a true child of God, and one who has been saved by God according to God's grace (undeserved favor). "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

How does one become a Christian?

- The Bible, God's word, says that eternal life (salvation) is a free gift of God which cannot be earned or deserved (Romans 6:23; Ephesians 2:8-9).
- However, we also find in God's word that all people are born sinners and cannot save themselves from the penalty of sin, which is eternal death and separation from God. God's requirement is perfection and no one is perfect (Isaiah 53:6; Romans 3:3-23; Ephesians 2:1-4).
- God tells us in His word that He is holy, meaning that He is perfect and that He is also just, meaning that He gives to sinners what is deserved, and because of His holiness and justice He must punish sinners. But thankfully, the Bible also says that God is loving and merciful and does not take pleasure in punishing sinners (Exodus 34:6-7; Ephesians 2:4-5).
- God has mercy on sinners by not giving them what they deserve. This is only possible because He gave His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, the God-man, to be the substitute for sinners bearing the penalty for their sin and satisfying God's justice (John 1:1,14; Isaiah 53:6; Romans 5:8).
- Jesus said that in order for anyone to have eternal life there must be repentance of sins and faith placed in His substitutionary death on the cross to pay for the penalty of one's sins. This faith must be in Jesus Christ alone, not depending on anything else including "good works" (Mark 1:15b; Acts 20:21; Ephesians 2:8-9).

What then is the response to these things if one desires to have eternal life and become a Christian?

1. Pray and ask God to forgive you. The Bible says that you must repent of your sins, being ashamed of them, genuinely regretting and grieving over them, and firmly deciding to make an about-face and turn away from sin and your old lifestyle (Acts 3:19-20).
2. Pray and tell God that you place your faith in Jesus Christ alone to save you. The Bible says that for you to become a Christian, you must place your faith and trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ who died on the cross to become your substitute and who took the penalty for your sin upon Himself once and for all (John 3:36).

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■ LIFE OF JESUS

April 11, 2021 | The Sermon on the Mount Part 1

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

- Write down what is considered the “good life” in our culture.
- Write down what you consider to be the good life.
- Read Matthew 5 (if you are feeling ambitious, read Matthew 5–7 to gain a full picture of the Sermon on the Mount).
- Pray God will open your heart to what His Word says is the good life.

THIS WEEK

■ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Jesus was adopting the role of Moses in delivering God’s instruction from the mountain top.

■ THEOLOGY APPLIED

The instruction Moses delivered to Israel after coming down from Mount Sinai was a gift, but the Israelites never allowed His teaching, often referred to as “the Law,” to have its intended effect. The Law was supposed to change the people’s hearts, but the Israelites never committed themselves to it to that degree. Jesus’s goal in this sermon was to show His followers, including us, how to allow the Law to reach our hearts.

■ MEDITATE

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17).

GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart for the truths you will encounter this week and to connect this passage’s main point to your own life.

❖: *Why would Matthew present Jesus as filling the same role Moses filled for Old Testament Israel?*

❖: *Why are laws crucial for human flourishing?*

Matthew begins his Gospel by establishing several parallels between Jesus and Moses, the great leader who brought the Israelites out of Egypt and gave them God's law. In both of their birth stories, Israelite boys were slaughtered by an ego-maniacal tyrant king (Exodus 1:15–22; Matthew 2:16). Both Moses and Jesus had to flee to keep from being executed by him (Exodus 2:15; Matthew 2:13). These parallels are enhanced by the way Matthew uses Scripture to create further links between Jesus and the people of Israel (Matthew 2:6, 15, and 18).

The most important link between Jesus and Moses occurs in what is known as the Sermon on the Mount. In the presence of a gathering crowd, Jesus went up on a mountain and taught the crowds, just as Moses went up Mount Sinai and brought God's Law down to teach the people. As Jesus emphasized in His sermon, His teaching did not contradict Moses's teaching but brought it to a greater fulfillment in the hearts of His followers.

❖: *Why is it important to see the continuity between Jesus and Moses, especially concerning their teaching on God's Law?*

❖: *Apart from your faith in God, what assurances would you have that there is a purpose to the daily occurrences of your life?*

APPLICATION POINT – In ancient times, the gods of various civilizations often took on more human qualities than we would typically associate with the idea or concept of “god.” Thus, their gods were often quite capricious, and those who believed in them could never be assured their gods would be consistent from one day to the next. Today, many people have abandoned belief in God in favor of naturalistic or evolutionary explanations of the universe. Again, they can have no expectation of a purpose or consistency in the universe. This is not the case for followers of Jesus. As Jesus makes clear in the sermon, God acts consistently in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. There are changes. Jesus claims to fulfill the Law, which suggests significant differences, but even the differences between what Moses did and what Jesus came to do follow a certain consistency. God

did not just arbitrarily decide what was right or wrong, neither in the time of Moses nor in the time of Christ. As you encounter trials and difficulties throughout this series, know that the God who gave Moses the Law and who empowered Jesus to give the Sermon on the Mount is consistent. He acts with a purpose.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Matthew 5 is the first section of the Sermon on the Mount. In many ways, the Sermon on the Mount is about how to live the good life. As we will see, however, the good life Jesus promoted is far different than what our culture considers to be the good life.

1. REAPING WHAT YOU SOW (MATTHEW 5:1–10)

2. REJOICING IN PERSECUTION (MATTHEW 5:11–16)

3. FULFILLING THE LAW (MATTHEW 5:17–48)

GOING DEEPER

+This section will investigate Matthew 5 in further detail to understand how Jesus's sermon promotes the true good life.

1. REAPING WHAT YOU SOW

■ MATTHEW 5:1–10

Q: *What general principle underlies all the Beatitudes?*

Q: *How do the Beatitudes turn conventional wisdom on its head?*

In Matthew 5:1–10, Jesus gave eight short sayings beginning with the word “blessed.” These sayings have become known as the “Beatitudes.” The Beatitudes are amazingly simple to understand when read individually. The challenging part of understanding them is trying to determine a single, overarching principle underlying them.

Perhaps these statements can best be understood by the phrase, “You reap what you sow.” For example, those who seek righteousness will find it (v. 6). If “you reap what you sow” is the general principle underlying the Beatitudes, then these short statements are remarkable not only for what they say but for how they turn the wisdom of the world upside down. For example, in ancient and modern times, the way to gain power and prestige and influence over others has been to exude confidence and boldness. According to Jesus, however, it is the meek who will inherit the earth (v. 5). We would typically think those who suffer persecution have lost everything. Jesus, however, said those who suffer persecution gain everything in gaining the kingdom of heaven (v. 10). This dynamic is not present in all the beatitudes, but for the ones in which it is active, Jesus shows His followers that the wisdom of this world does not always correspond to the wisdom of His kingdom. You will reap what you sow, but the economy here is determined by the rules Jesus set for His kingdom, not the rules that seem to govern the world from our modern perspective.

Q: *How does the principle, “You reap what you sow,” relate to the gospel principle, “Jesus has paid the full price for our sins”?*

Q: *How can you use the Beatitudes to challenge prevailing beliefs in our culture?*

APPLICATION POINT – People will do anything to get ahead in life. This urge to gain profit or power over others leads some people to undercut their peers in order to stand out for the big promotion at work. For others, it leads them to cheat on a test at school. It can lead others into criminal activity. Strangely enough, the urge to get ahead encourages some people to become victims. There is nothing fallen humanity will not do to promote itself. This is the mindset the Beatitudes prohibit for Christians. For Christians, self-promotion never excuses immorality. Our lives cannot be governed by the drive to succeed or triumph over others.

There are eight beatitudes. For the next month, focus on adopting the mindset and principles of two beatitudes per week. Allow these principles to govern your work and family habits during the week. On some occasions, you will likely be taken advantage of by others, perhaps even members of your own family. That is okay. The point of the Beatitudes is not getting what is yours but getting what Christ offers you, which is far better. The Beatitudes offer a countercultural way of life that will get you noticed. Be prepared to share the hope you have in Christ with those who see you living for another kingdom.

2. REJOICING IN PERSECUTION

■ MATTHEW 5:11–16

Q: *How does the final “blessed are you” statement differ from the previous eight?*

Q: *How do the examples of salt and light relate to those who persecute the followers of Jesus?*

The followers of Jesus were always destined to suffer persecution. Jesus recognized this, and He also recognized the dangers of giving into the demands of those who would persecute His followers. The examples of salt and light serve as a warning to all those who endure persecution because of their Christian beliefs. Giving in is not an option! If followers of Christ abandon their testimony concerning Him, they are no longer capable of fulfilling their mission. They become tasteless salt or obstructed light. Instead of giving into persecution, Jesus urged His followers to rejoice in persecution. Persecution is an indication that you are fulfilling the mission He gave you. You are being salt and light to the world. Thus, Jesus calls on everyone who suffers persecution because of their belief in Him to rejoice in the confirmation of their faithfulness. Suffering persecution is an indication of a blessed life.

Q: *How are Jesus’s words counterintuitive in our culture?*

Q: *In what ways, directly or indirectly, have you suffered persecution for your faith in Jesus?*

APPLICATION POINT – We live in a pampered society. Our comforts have increased exponentially over previous generations. Many of the daily struggles they had are easily fixed by flipping a switch or turning of a knob. And we take for granted many of the modern conveniences we have such as plumbing, electricity, automobiles, and computers. These conveniences are not wrong in themselves, but they can lead to habits of thought that prevent us from appreciating biblical truths. For example, many people in today’s world consider even the slightest discomfort or hardship something to be avoided. If a task is difficult or challenging, then something must need to be fixed. This mindset is foreign to the Beatitudes. In the Beatitudes, hardship in this life is the forerunner to the blessings we will experience in the next. Discomfort can be tolerated because this life is not all there is.

The attitude on display in the Beatitudes is crucial for us to persevere through persecution. To be salt and light in the world, we must be able to endure persecution. For the moment, most of us do not face significant persecution, but there are increasing signs of change on this front. In light of this, we must prepare ourselves to face persecution. We need to entrench ourselves in our Christian commitments and be prepared to suffer for them. On a small scale, we can prepare to face persecutions in life by refusing to bow a knee to the false gods of comfort and ease. Consider inviting a small hardship into your life. Do not automatically choose the easier of two options. Forego the next gadget that will make life incrementally easier. Invite small hardships into your life as a reminder that you may one day be called on to face much more significant hardships because of your faith.

3. FULFILLING THE LAW

■ MATTHEW 5:17–48

Q: *Why would someone have accused Jesus of abolishing the Law and the Prophets?*

Q: *In what way could Jesus fulfill the Law and the Prophets?*

Jesus often raised the ire of the religious leaders of His day because, in their legalistic minds, He was teaching others to disregard the teachings found in their Scripture. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus demonstrated that nothing could be further from the truth. He was not telling others to disregard the teachings of the Jewish Scriptures but helping them to see the fulfillment of them.

It may seem strange to us to hear Jesus describe Israel's Scriptures, especially the parts we understand to be the Law, as something that needed to be fulfilled. In one sense, Israel's Scriptures are fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ (Luke 24:27, 44–47). That is, the Old Testament describes a world that is in desperate need of Jesus's work and, in some places, anticipates Jesus's coming to complete this work. In another sense, probably closer to what is intended in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament by helping His followers see the true intent behind the Scriptures. According to Jesus, the Law in the Old Testament was worded in such a way as to promote righteousness by limiting the disastrous effects of human sin.

The religious leaders of Jesus's day, however, had badly missed this crucial point. They believed the Law described the limits of what was and was not permissible. Some of the specific examples Jesus mentioned are discussed

further below, but the main point is that it was the religious leaders of Jesus's day who had relaxed the righteous requirements of the Law in their misunderstanding of what it was all about. Thus, Jesus, who was accused by others of disregarding the Law, declared one's righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20).

Q: *Why was it important for Jesus to show the continuity between His message and the Old Testament?*

Q: *In what ways are you inadvertently teaching others to relax the righteous intent of the Old Testament law?*

APPLICATION – Have you or someone you know ever wondered whether a particular action should be considered a sin or not? Oftentimes, people question how far down a particular insidious path they can venture before they actually fall into sin. “Is it okay if I light up but don’t inhale?” “What if we just ‘make out’ but don’t become more physical?” You have likely heard these or similar conversations play out. The problem with such questions and scenarios is they are wrong-headed from the start. Such a mindset makes the same mistake the religious leaders of Jesus’s time made. God’s law is about pursuing righteousness, not about stating unequivocally how close one can venture to the edge of a precipice without falling. As you read through the remainder of this lesson, consider situations in which you have heard or are likely to hear these laws misconstrued. Be prepared to point others toward a better goal, the pursuit of righteousness, rather than becoming ensconced in their misguided efforts to determine how far they can run toward sin without falling into it.

Q: *How does Jesus’s explanation of the Old Testament injunction against murder push His listeners further toward righteousness?*

Q: *What is the relationship between murder and reconciliation?*

Jesus began with a well-known Old Testament law. In Exodus 20:13, Moses prohibited murder. This is one of the Ten Commandments, the ten great principles forming the foundation of all Old Testament Law. The scribes and

Pharisees would have had their followers believe that as long as they did not murder another person, they were fulfilling the intent of the Law. Jesus, however, did not settle for such a low standard. Instead, He showed that the prohibition against murder was put in place to limit the extent of sin's destruction. If an Israelite became angry at another person, they could not act on their anger by murdering the person. To do so would incur the retributive justice from the community. The prohibition against murder limited how far a person's unchecked sin could lead them.

The religious leaders during Jesus's time claimed that as long as one person did not murder another, then their conduct was righteous. But Jesus exposed this as a perversion of the true intent behind the Law. Jesus did not allow God's righteous standard to be relaxed. Instead, He taught that any ill-will toward another person falls short of the righteousness God expects from His people. Thus, rather than focus on the outer limit of socially acceptable conduct, Jesus not only forbade murder but promoted reconciliation (Matthew 5:24). Reconciliation between two parties is a far greater expression of the righteousness God expects from His children.

Q: *In what ways can you pursue reconciliation after experiencing conflict with others?*

Q: *Why is it challenging to give up grudges?*

APPLICATION POINT – Jesus's approach to Old Testament Law helps us see that our sins are often rooted in deeper spiritual deficiencies than we might first recognize. For example, murder not only demonstrates hatred for another person but also a deeply rooted sense of pride. The reason you hate another person is because they have not sufficiently recognized how central you are to holding the universe together, and until they give you the respect you know you are due, reconciliation is an impossibility. In reality, reconciliation demands that you put yourself aside for the sake of others. Reconciliation demands that you recognize that it is God who is at the center of the universe. If we treat the Old Testament laws as the limits of what is acceptable, we will have no avenue to address sin in our lives. If there is someone you need to be reconciled with, begin by considering whether you need to first repent of pride.

Q: *Why is a prohibition against adultery an inadequate standard for sexual morality?*

Q: *How do Jesus's comments on lust reveal what biblical sexual morality looks like?*

After addressing murder and reconciliation, Jesus turned His attention to adultery, which is also one of the ten foundational principles underlying the Old Testament Law (Exodus 20:14). It would be possible to have the injunction against adultery signal the dividing line between what was righteous behavior and what was sexually immoral. Again, Jesus would have none of it. The prohibition of adultery was intended to limit the destruction caused by unchecked lust. It was never intended to signal the line between what was sinful and what was permissible. Jesus's point is quite obvious once even a little thought is given to the matter.

Jesus strengthened this point as He elaborated on this subject. If the act of adultery were the dividing line between what was and what was not acceptable for sexual morality, then Jesus's comments concerning the eye and the hand would be impossible to understand. Why put forward such extreme measures if the eye and the hand are not what ultimately push one over the line into sin? No, Jesus was teaching us that what we allow our eyes to dwell on is an indicator of what is in our hearts. The hand that would initiate an adulterous encounter is just as culpable as the whole body would be if that deed were carried out. We would be better off without our eyes and hands if they are instruments of pursuing sexual immorality. But we would be better still if our eyes and hands were instruments of pursuing righteousness.

Q: *How can we avoid lust in a society that panders to sensuality?*

Q: *How can we metaphorically follow Jesus's injunctions to cut out our eye and cut off our hand in order to flee sexual temptation?*

APPLICATION POINT – Our culture is currently seeing a militant attempt to liberate sex from any moral or ethical restraint beyond mere consent. Such a project will inevitably end in disaster, and in many ways, we are already seeing the effects of this tragedy. Christians must make every effort to avoid getting swept up in this largescale cultural project. Job claims to have made a covenant with his eyes to never look lustfully upon a woman (Job 31:1). This a minimum commitment for us in fighting the onslaught of sexual perversion we are confronted with. In the coming years, it will likely grow more challenging for Christians to indulge in the entertainment industry. As Jesus argued, this is a small price to pay to protect our souls from such devastating sin. Evaluate the programming you watch and the music you listen to. If these are working against the sexual purity you must seek as a follower of Christ, it would be better to cut them off than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

Q: *How does Jesus demonstrate the true meaning of the eye-for-an-eye law [Matthew 5:38]?*

Q: *How could eye-for-an-eye become a distortion of God's commitment to justice?*



APPLICATION POINT – Strangely, we live in a society that balks at the notion of carrying out anything resembling eye-for-an-eye as a legal standard but applauds the application of the same concept on a personal level. Personal justice demands that you even the score with those who have wronged you, and the best way to even the score is by doing to them what they did to you. You have likely seen this form of justice carried out numerous times. If you are living for God's glory, however, Jesus invites you to adopt a different standard. Life is not about getting even with those who have harmed you. It is about living for God's glory. This week commit to seeking God's glory when others would seek to do you harm. This does not mean laying justice aside. Some actions must be accounted for. Failing to seek justice does not glorify God. But as a follower of Christ, justice can never be about retribution. Perhaps your unwillingness to put yourself and your vindication at the center of everything will become a powerful testimony to the magnificence of the God you serve.

NEXT STEPS

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was teaching His followers how to live for eternity. His teaching requires us to adopt some countercultural practices and mindsets. If we are living for the life to come, we cannot live like this life is all there is. If we are living for the life to come, we will hold strong to our Christian commitments even in the face of severe persecution. If we are living for the life to come, we will pursue righteousness instead of seeing how far we can run toward sin before falling into it. The broad principle to be adopted from the Sermon on the Mount is to live now in a way that prioritizes the life to come. Seek to put this principle into practice in your life.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

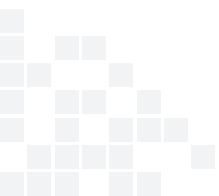


God, help me to live for your kingdom to come.

Lord Jesus, help me to engrain the Beatitudes into my thought life and into my outlook on life.

Lord Jesus, thank you for fulfilling the Law and the Prophets fully. Help my life to be marked with a true and consistent application of these principles.

Father, help prepare my soul for persecution.



■ LIFE OF JESUS

April 18, 2021 | *The Sermon on the Mount Part 2*

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

- Write down the meaning of *hypocrite*.
- Write down how you would describe an authentic Christian.
- Read Matthew 6 (again, if you feel ambitious, read Matthew 5–7 to gain a full picture of the Sermon on the Mount).
- Pray God will use this lesson to produce authentic righteousness in you and your group.

THIS WEEK

■ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Jesus desired for His followers to pursue authentic righteousness.

■ THEOLOGY APPLIED

Our lives should demonstrate how we have been transformed by the gospel, but these demonstrations must be authentic. Hypocrisy will undercut our witness.

■ MEDITATE

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 6:1).

GETTING STARTED

+ *Use this section to prepare your heart for the truths you will encounter this week and to connect this passage’s main point to your own life.*

Q: *Why is hypocrisy universally condemned?*

Q: *What does it mean for us to practice our righteousness?*

Even in our relativistic age, hypocrisy is universally condemned. To say one thing while doing another destroys our credibility, even among those who would otherwise be supportive. False motives will likewise subvert the authenticity of our actions. As Christians, our lives have been radically transformed by the gospel of Jesus Christ. The influence of the gospel affects every part of who we are because the gospel changes our very nature. Such transformation should be evident in the way Christians conduct their lives. We put our Christian faith into practice through righteous deeds. True righteousness always draws attention because of how countercultural it is. Jesus was aware of how seductive this kind of attention can be, even for His followers. Thus, He warned them against replacing God by putting themselves at the center of their righteous deeds. Such hypocrisy would undermine the very transformation they were trying to show.

Q: *How do you see hypocrisy at work in our society?*

Q: *Why are Christians or church people often labeled as hypocrites?*

APPLICATION POINT – Over the past few centuries, there has been a growing consensus that churches are epicenters of hypocrisy. If you are committed to Jesus Christ, you should find this concerning. Given Jesus’s teaching in this passage, the church is the last place we should encounter hypocrisy.

The problem appears to be twofold. First, many people outside the church misunderstand the nature of the church. The church is not a gathering of those who have their lives completely in order and always act in accordance to God’s will. Quite the opposite. The church is a gathering of confessed sinners. A true follower of Christ recognizes that all Christians, no matter how committed, are still sinners. A Christian is simply a sinner who has acknowledged the need for Christ. Thus, when outsiders observe sin within the church, they should not automatically presume that the church is full of hypocrites. The truth is that the church is full of people who need Jesus.

Second, those within the church have often failed to adequately express the content of what they believe to those outside the church. When the church leads with moral obligations that are untethered to the gospel, we undermine the central pillar of their confession. Non-believers are left with little alternative but to assume being a follower of Christ is centered on a list of dos and don'ts. Christians are prime examples of hypocrisy when they don't abide by their own rules or when they ignore glaring instances of injustice in favor of their own shallow moral code.

The good news is there is one solution for both of these misunderstandings. Christians need always to lead with the gospel. If we lead with the gospel, the world will know we are not perfect but are in desperate need of a Savior. If we lead with the gospel, outsiders will not think our moral code is the center of our belief but will know it is Christ crucified and raised to life that everything else stems from.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Matthew 6 covers a lot of subjects, but the entire chapter is predicated on the first verse. Jesus promoted authentic righteousness among His followers by warning them against hypocritical actions and false motives.

1. AUTHENTIC RIGHTEOUSNESS (MATTHEW 6:1–18)

2. ANSWERING QUESTIONS ABOUT AUTHENTIC RIGHTEOUSNESS (MATTHEW 6:19–34)

GOING DEEPER

+This section will investigate Matthew 6 in further detail to understand how Jesus advocates for authentic righteousness.

1. AUTHENTIC RIGHTEOUSNESS

■ MATTHEW 6:1–18

Q: *What was Jesus warning against in Matthew 6:2–4?*

Q: *Why did Jesus want giving to be done in secret?*

Jesus knew the sinful nature of humanity better than anyone. He also knew His followers would continue to struggle with sin even while seeking to follow Him. They were even capable of sinning by trying to follow Jesus. Jesus warned His followers that truly following Him demanded authenticity. If, in performing actions done to show the world the excellence of Christ, we also seek our own gratification, we are sinning by falling into hypocrisy. There is no authenticity to our actions. We are really seeking our own glory rather than the glory of Jesus.

Jesus offered His audience three examples of how hypocrisy can infiltrate even deeds done out of devotion to Him. The first concerns deeds of charity. Jesus warned His followers against giving in order to be seen by others and gain their admiration. Instead, He told His followers to give in secret. This would guard them from the temptation of giving to earn the admiration of others.

Q: *Why should Christians give out of their accumulated possessions?*

Q: *How do many modern donation practices undermine the point Jesus was making?*

APPLICATION POINT – Jesus taught that there was a direct connection between how people spend their money and what they value most. This commonsense principle helps us evaluate how we use our resources and guides us to seek God’s glory with our wealth. The one loophole in this principle is inauthenticity. If we give to impress others with how much we love God, then our giving is a charade masking how much we love ourselves. Thus, the giving principle can be validated if our giving is done in secret. This week, consider how you can protect the anonymity of your giving, both to your church and to others. Although there is a value in visibly placing an undisclosed amount of money in an offering plate or container, it is possible for this action to be done to impress others. It is a question of intent. If our intent is to signify that faithful church members should promote the church and its ministries financially, we have an authentic motive, but if our intent is to impress others with our giving, we have an inauthentic motive. If you struggle with inauthentic giving, perhaps you should consider giving online. If this anonymity robs you of the joy of giving, you need to repent of inauthenticity.

Q: *What two prayer practices did Jesus condemn in these verses?*

Q: *Why did the Gentiles emphasize the length of their prayers?*

The second illustration Jesus gave has to do with prayer. Public prayer offers another opportunity to make a spectacle out of our religious devotion. Jesus highlighted two dangerous prayer habits. The Jewish religious elites used public prayer to draw attention to themselves. They were not even content to limit their hypocritical prayer to religious settings. They took their hypocrisy to the streets, putting their “piety” on display before the whole world. The Gentiles likely followed similar practices and even added the element of longevity to their prayer rituals.

Jesus would have none of this. He advocated the importance of private prayer to protect His followers from the dangers of inauthentic prayer. He also drew attention to God’s omniscience as a theological guide to prayer. His followers could not tell God anything He did not already know. Furthermore, God would not be impressed by how many times or in how many different ways they made their requests known. Such efforts could only be intended to draw attention.

Q: *Why is praying to gain the admiration of others particularly insidious?*

Q: *Does Jesus’s instruction in this passage prohibit public prayer?*

APPLICATION POINT – The application for this passage is built into it. This week, devote time to a private prayer. If you only pray in public, it demonstrates that you either do not really believe in the power of prayer or that you believe prayer is a means for impressing others. This week do exactly what Jesus said. Find a place to pray privately. This may be an issue of timing as much as space. I can pray privately in my living room at 5:00am, but by 7:00am that is no longer an option. So, for me, the issue is whether private prayer is worth getting up earlier. Many of you may have the space in which to pray privately. It is a matter of breaking yourself away from the place at home you would normally occupy. For you, it may be an issue of sacrificing your routine or your normal leisure activities.

Q: *How does the Lord's Prayer exemplify authentic righteousness?*

Q: *How does the Lord's Prayer address both vertical [God and Man] concerns and horizontal [person to person] concerns?*

Matthew 6:9–13 is widely known as the “Lord’s Prayer.” It is often studied and quoted on its own, apart from its surrounding context. There is little wonder why this is so. The Lord’s Prayer is as extraordinary as it is simple. The prayer is, however, intricately related to the idea of authentic righteousness, as is the rest of Matthew 6. The prayer begins by prioritizing the glory and the will of God, strongly echoing the concern for authentic righteousness in the rest of the chapter. In Jesus’s prayer, the believer is shown to seek God and His glory first before moving on to personal concerns. The prayer concludes by asking God for forgiveness, but only after claiming to have been forgiving of others. Thus, to pray the Lord’s Prayer will demand a measure of authenticity. If you are unwilling to forgive others, you cannot beseech God for forgiveness. This requirement for authenticity is given a fuller expression after the Lord’s Prayer concludes (Matthew 6:14–15).

Q: *The Lord's Prayer is a model for us to follow. How can you incorporate the Lord's Prayer into your personal prayer life? Into your corporate prayer times?*

Q: *What demands does the Lord's Prayer make on the one who prays it?*

As noted above, the “Lord’s Prayer” has become widely known among Christians and even within popular culture. It is common to hear the Lord’s Prayer recited in a variety of situations. But verbatim quotation may not have been what Jesus had in mind. He told His followers to pray “like” this, as in, use this prayer as a guide. Such an exercise would undoubtedly be fruitful, especially considering how it begins by acknowledging God’s glory and God’s will. This week, use the Lord’s Prayer as a model for your own prayers. The Lord’s Prayer can be summarized as 1) praise God, 2) pray for God’s will to be done, 3) request God’s provision, 4) confess, and 5) request God’s perseverance.

Q: *What assumption did Jesus make in Matthew 6:16?*

Q: *How does biblical fasting differ from a weight-loss diet plan?*

The final example Jesus gave of authentic righteousness is fasting. While religious fasting may have fallen out of popular practice, the concept is likely still familiar to most people. Fasting is even the focus of some popular diet plans. The difference, of course, is that biblical fasting is intended to strengthen the believer's dependence upon God and prayer, not to meet weight-loss goals. As with the other two spiritual disciplines noted in this passage, the practice of fasting was easily abused during Jesus's day by those who wanted to make a spectacle of their religious devotion. As with the other spiritual disciplines, Jesus advocated for practicing fasting discreetly. Unlike the other two spiritual disciplines, fasting cannot be easily practiced in private because it requires an extended period of time. Jesus does not alter His principle, however. He merely adapts it by urging His followers to take measures to conceal their fasting while in public. The dangers of inauthenticity were too real for His followers to chance.

Q: *Is fasting the least practiced spiritual discipline in your life?*

Q: *In what additional ways, beyond the three examples in Matthew 6, can you "practice your righteousness"? What are the inherent dangers of these practices?*

At one point in His ministry, Jesus defended His disciples for not fasting (Matthew 9:14–17). His defense would not seem to apply to modern Christians, and Jesus does seem to assume that His followers will practice fasting. Since this is the case, are you one among many of Jesus's followers who do not even consider this discipline? If so, it is time to put it into practice. Many have noticed that the other two spiritual disciplines noted in this chapter have also been on the decline among Christians. Could this be because we have become so accustomed to neglecting fasting that it has carried over into the other spiritual disciplines as well? Fasting does not always have to entail days and days of going without food, such as Jesus did prior to His wilderness temptation (Matthew 4:2). You can fast one meal at a time. In fact, this would likely be a much more reasonable and safer goal if you have not previously practiced fasting. Keep in mind that biblical fasting is more than just the refusal of food. It is the refusal of food for the purposes of strengthening your faith in God's provision and in prayer.

2. ANSWERING QUESTIONS ABOUT AUTHENTIC RIGHTEOUSNESS

■ MATTHEW 6:19–34

Q: *How are the “treasures” in this passage related to the “rewards” in the first half of Matthew 6?*

Q: *How are the “masters” in this passage related to the first half of Matthew 6?*

The second half of Matthew 6 answers two questions that naturally arise from Jesus’s demand for authentic righteousness. The first question would be something like, “If I am practicing my righteousness, does it really matter what my motives are?” Jesus’s words are a strong affirmative, and He gave two reasons. The first concerns the believer’s reward for a righteous life. Practicing one’s righteousness for others will produce the sought-after reward (Matthew 6:2, 5, and 16), but this reward is earth-bound, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves steal (Matthew 6:19). Inauthentic righteousness produces a reward that will not last and cannot compare to the reward for authentic righteousness. The second concerns the believer’s loyalties. Jesus drew an analogy of a servant serving two masters, saying the servant would naturally love one and hate the other. This “love-hate” language is a figure of speech, much like exaggeration. It is the same dynamic as when Jesus said following Him would require a person to hate his mother or father (Luke 14:26). The idea is not necessarily “hate,” but one of priority. Thus, the servant of two masters would not necessarily hate one of them but would inevitably have to choose which one he will follow when they make incompatible demands on him. In the same way, we cannot practice righteousness for both Jesus and the world. Motives really do matter.

To illustrate His claim that motives matter, Jesus gave another analogy. Motives matter in the same way that good eyesight is needed for the body to function properly. A person who loses their eyesight is not able to function as well as they could otherwise, if at all. In the same way, if our motives for righteousness are bad, then the integrity of our action is marred.

Q: *Why are your motives important?*

Q: *What would cause someone to want both heavenly and earthly rewards?*

APPLICATION POINT – We live in a “get-it-while-you-can” world. If you could double your investment, why wouldn’t you? Wouldn’t impressing others while pleasing God just increase your personal capital all the more? Our world drives us to compromise our beliefs in every way possible. In the face of these expectations, we must allow Jesus’s words to echo loudly in our minds. “No one can serve two masters.” If we try that juggling act, we will quickly drop the ball.

Q: *Why would Jesus’s demand for authentic righteousness cause anxiety?*

Q: *How does anxiety demonstrate a lack of faith?*

The second question answered in Matthew 6:19–34 would be something like, “Can I trust in God’s provision?” Again, Jesus answered strongly in the affirmative. He gave two illustrations of God’s provision, both of which operate on a lesser-to-greater principle. The first concerns the birds of the air. Birds do not seek provision for the future but take each day as it comes. If God provides for something as insignificant as birds, will He not also provide for His followers? In a similar way, the lilies in the field do not labor for their beauty. God provides it for them. The short-lived nature of the lilies’ beauty demonstrates how generous God can be with His provision. God does not worry that the beauty of a lily will not last long. The extent of His provision is unbounded. Since this is the case, why should followers of Jesus worry if God will provide for them? Matthew concludes this passage by summarizing its main point, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:33).

Q: *Why is anxiety increasing within our culture?*

Q: *How can you fight anxiety in your life?*

APPLICATION POINT – The progress of technology and human capability is amazing. With a few strokes of a keyboard, we can accomplish in a few seconds things that would have required weeks or months in previous generations, if they were able to do them at all. Humanity can accomplish more now than at any other time in our history. We can heal and eradicate diseases that previous generations succumbed to quite often. We can travel farther in a few hours than most people would have traveled in their entire lives. We can communicate with people on the other side of the world instantaneously. Despite all our progress, anxiety has grown at unprecedented levels.

It seems that no matter how good things get, people cannot escape feeling vulnerable and at risk. The explanation is spelled out quite easily in Matthew 6. Humanity—and that includes Christians more often than we would like to think—has submitted to the wrong master. If we only partially submit our lives to Him, we will always struggle to rest in God’s provision for us. What we need more than any technology, more than any medical advancement, and more than any worldly pleasure is to learn to submit to God’s reign over our lives.

NEXT STEPS

Giving, praying, and fasting are a few examples of what are known as spiritual disciplines. The word “discipline” in this instance is used positively. We do not practice spiritual disciplines because we are being punished. It may be more helpful to think of these things as “spiritual exercises.” They are intended to help us exercise our faith. There are many more spiritual disciplines Christians should follow, such Bible reading, evangelism, and worship. Of course, they are all subject to the same abuses we mentioned in this chapter, but that is no reason to avoid practicing our righteousness before God. This week begin practicing the spiritual disciplines. Start with the ones in Matthew 6. Do some research or discuss with your group what additional spiritual disciplines you could practice. Take every precaution possible, as Jesus advocates in this passage, to practice these disciplines authentically.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God’s Word this week.

- Lord, keep me from practicing my righteousness before others.
- Lord Jesus, if you have given your life for the sake of my sins, why would I ever doubt your provision in my life?
- God, I fully submit to your rule over my life.

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil” (Matthew 6:9–13).

■ LIFE OF JESUS

April 25, 2021 | *The Sermon on the Mount Part 3*

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

- Are a person's speech or actions more significant in developing their reputation?
- Read Matthew 7 (Again, reading all the Sermon on the Mount will provide beneficial context).
- Pray God would help you live in a manner that is consistent with your faith.

THIS WEEK

■ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

God has been incredibly gracious to His people. Our ability to mediate this grace to others is the mark of a true follower of Christ.

■ THEOLOGY APPLIED

Live in a manner that is consistent with your faith.

■ MEDITATE

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21).

GETTING STARTED

+ *Use this section to prepare your heart for the truths you will encounter this week and to connect this passage's main point to your own life.*

Q: *Grace is a gift from God, but how does receiving grace then make demands on our lives?*

Q: *How can you demonstrate your faith in Christ to a watching world?*

Matthew 5 emphasizes reaping what you sow and seeking the true intent of the Law. Matthew 6 emphasizes authentic righteousness. In many ways, Matthew 7 begins to link the teachings of Chapters 5 and 6 together. The Sermon on the Mount concludes by answering two implied questions that continue to be relevant for Christians today. How should I live as a Christian? How can I recognize true followers of Christ? With these ideas in mind, Jesus concludes this strategic message to His followers.

The answers to these implied questions involve putting the principles discussed in the Sermon on the Mount into action. Although our confession is a sure sign of our salvation, the veracity of our confession and our belief to others often depend upon actions. They cannot peer into our hearts to evaluate the truthfulness of our words, but they can see how we put the teachings of Christ and the rest of the Bible into action. This is not an unreasonable expectation. If we claim that our confession makes a real difference in our lives, both now and in eternity, then the difference should be apparent to those who observe us.

Q: *What is the relationship between faith and works for a believer in Christ Jesus?*

Q: *Why is there a temptation to drive a wedge between a believer's faith and works?*

APPLICATION POINT – The most common way to abandon orthodox Christianity is not through total denial of the Christian faith. It is rare for a person to abandon every single aspect of their faith in Christ. Instead, it is more common for people to embrace the parts of the Christian faith they like and exclude the parts they don't. For example, many Christians have mistakenly embraced God's love to the exclusion of His righteous judgment of sin, thinking that a loving God could not possibly make moral demands upon us or hold us accountable for our sin. Those who go down this road embrace only part of the teaching of Scripture. They make no attempt to hold everything the Bible says together.

In the same way, denying either faith or works has been a recurring issue throughout the history of Christianity. Faith and works are both integral to the Christian faith. We are saved by faith for good works (Ephesians 2:3–10). The absence of either becomes problematic. Make sure you are consistently examining your beliefs about God, Christ, and Christianity to ensure you are holding everything the Bible says together. This often requires even the most astute theologian to reconsider some strongly held beliefs. The rest of us should expect nothing less for ourselves.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Matthew 7 addresses multiple, interrelated topics. This lesson will group them under the following three headings:

1. THE GOLDEN RULE (MATTHEW 7:1–14)

2. RECOGNIZING AUTHENTIC FOLLOWERS OF JESUS (MATTHEW 7:15–23)

3. BUILDING ON THE ROCK (MATTHEW 7:24–27)

GOING DEEPER

+This section will study the themes of Matthew 7 in more detail to see how they encourage Jesus's followers to live in a manner that is consistent with their faith.

1. THE GOLDEN RULE

■ MATTHEW 7:1–14

Q: How is the Golden Rule applied in Matthew 7:1–6?

Q: How is the Golden Rule applied in Matthew 7:7–11?

Matthew 7:12 expresses what is often known as the Golden Rule. It is the basic principle guiding behavior within society, and Jesus says it is also the basis of the teachings found in the Law and the Prophets. Treat others how you would like them to treat you. At the heart of the Golden Rule is the recognition of the personhood and the value of others. The world is not all about us.

The Golden Rule is exemplified in two ways in these verses—judgment and generosity. Each of these two themes has its own specific emphasis, but both are examples of the Golden Rule in action. In His first application of it, Jesus points out our tendency to be harsher with others than we would like them to be with us. Such judgmentalism elevates our own importance and worth over the other person's and is a poor representation of God's concern for justice. In His second application, He commends generosity among His followers. God the Father is generous to us in the same way parents are generous to their children. We can freely approach God with our requests because we serve a good Father who delights to give generously to His children. Thus, God is a model of the generosity we must show others.

Q: *How are Jesus's words about judgment misapplied today?*

Q: *How do you see the Golden Rule being subverted in our culture? What attitudes or rules are replacing it?*

APPLICATION POINT – Matthew 7:1 has the ignoble reputation of being one of the verses most quoted by non-Christians against Christians. The thought is that Christians should never condemn any type of behavior because of what Jesus says in this verse. This has always been an exercise in not following a thought to its logical conclusion and ripping a verse out of its theological context. First, while many people may quote this verse spontaneously in response to what they see as judgmentalism, no morally sane person would take this verse to be an absolute prohibition against condemning certain behaviors. Even in our morally confused society, nearly everyone admits that some behaviors are immoral and should be condemned. No one truly takes this verse as an absolute standard. Everyone eventually judges. The real tension when Matthew 7:1 is quoted in this manner as the standard for what is moral and what is immoral. Christians must rely on the Bible. What standard can non-Christians uphold?

Second, those who would quote this verse to thwart what they see as judgmentalism have an incredibly narrow reading of Scripture. They would have to read just a few verses further into Matthew 7 before to see Jesus making moral judgments (Matthew 7:5, 6, 11, 13, 15, 21) and commanding His followers to do the same (Matthew 7:16,

24). Remember, as Christians, we want to hold everything the Bible says together to produce a consistently biblical theology. Those who would isolate and hold up this verse as the singular standard for how Christians should engage the world with the claims of Christ are not nearly as biblical as they seem to think.

Q: *How is Matthew 7:6 related to the Golden Rule?*

Q: *What are the limitations of the Golden Rule?*

Matthew 7:6 may at first seem like a misplaced statement in the middle of a treatise on the Golden Rule. The statement itself is often seen as an enigma. What in the world do dogs, pigs, pearls, and sacred things have to do with the rest of what Jesus is discussing?

The answer to these conundrums is found in seeing Matthew 7:6 as a warning to be cautious when extending the Golden Rule beyond the community of faith. This verse limits the application of the Golden Rule to keep Christians from being abused by those who do not live by the same grace as the followers of Jesus. The point of verse 6 is that it is foolish to expect non-believers to respond the way Christians will when receiving the kind of grace that underlies the Golden Rule. Jesus wants His followers to know they are not obligated to continually extend the application of the Golden Rule to those who refuse to receive it in faith.

The Golden Rule, at least as Jesus expresses it in Matthew 7:12, is proactive rather than reactive. We are not to wait to see how others will treat us before making the love of Christ known. If, however, others repeatedly refuse to respond favorably to grace, we are not obligated to continue to open ourselves up to their abuses of God's grace. This does not mean we begin leading with cruelty. The inverse of the Golden Rule is not the standard being sought here. But when our proactive mission to demonstrate the love of Jesus Christ is met with hostility, Christians are not obligated to continually assume the grace they would extend to others will be reciprocated. To do so would be to cast our pearls before swine. The Golden Rule is not a call to be abused.

Q: *How should we balance perseverance in our Christian witness while continuing to heed Jesus's warning?*

Q: *How should we respond when Jesus does or says something unexpected?*

APPLICATION POINT – Jesus was a countercultural voice to the religious authorities of His day. He often did and said things they did not expect or appreciate. Strangely enough, this is also true for Christians today. No matter how clear a picture we think we have of Jesus, we can still find ourselves confronted by Jesus in unexpected ways, much like in Matthew 7:6, which requires two things on our part—humility and faithfulness. We should feel humbled when we realize our Savior’s depth is always beyond our full comprehension, no matter how well we think we understand Him. We need to be faithful in doing the hard work of identifying the missing piece in our understanding of our Savior. We also need to combine these virtues as we seek to live in obedience to Jesus’s commands even when we do not fully understand. Jesus is the one who gets it right. We have to be faithful as we try to keep up.

2. RECOGNIZING AUTHENTIC FOLLOWERS OF JESUS

■ MATTHEW 7:15–23

Q: *Are Jesus’s words concerning the way to life inclusive or exclusive?*

Q: *How does Jesus say His followers will be recognized?*

Inclusiveness is highly valued in our society—at least as an ideal, though one often wonders how much in practice. Indeed, the virtues of racial and socio-economic inclusiveness hardly need a defense and are frequently promoted. Christians should desire and seek this kind of inclusiveness. Theological inclusivism, on the other hand, has no place among professing Christians. Today, many people want to argue that all religions are the same and that religious people, along with non-religious people, will eventually come to understand they are all on the same path seeking the same goal. Such an argument utterly ignores Jesus’s claim in Matthew 7:13–14. According to Jesus, everyone alive is on one of two paths. One path leads to destruction. The other leads to life. Thus, religious or theological inclusivism cannot include Christianity. Jesus’s words simply will not allow for another way leading to life. In the same way, Christians cannot endorse religious inclusivity. Although there are times when Christians may stand with the adherents of other faiths on certain moral and ethical issues, Christians ultimately proclaim an exclusive Savior, Jesus Christ. Salvation is found only in Him. Christianity is inclusive because anyone and everyone are welcome. Salvation and a restored relationship with God are open and available to any and all. But it is exclusive because Jesus is the only way, the one path to the Father. Not all roads lead to heaven.

Since this is the case, how can true followers of Christ, those on the narrow path, be recognized? According to Jesus, His followers will be known by how their actions testify to His influence in their lives. Jesus gives us an easy-to-understand illustration. In the same way thorn bushes and thistles cannot produce fruit, those who are not His followers have not been influenced by His grace and cannot demonstrate it with their actions. This is crucial for evaluating those who claim their ministry is tied to Jesus. False teachers may give the outward appearance of a follower of Christ, but close investigation into their character and ministry will show them to be imposters.

❓: *Since false prophets seek to deceive others, they will also try to point to “good fruit” in their ministry. How can Christians see through their deception?*

❓: *In what ways should Matthew 7:13-14 influence our church growth goals?*

APPLICATION POINT – It is exciting to see churches grow numerically. When churches are faithful to the gospel and discipleship, it is evidence of the continued work of the Holy Spirit and of the progress of God’s mission. Naturally, every church wants to see growth in its membership. Jesus’s words in Matthew 7:13–14, however, should caution us against prioritizing numerical growth over faithfulness to God’s Word. The question “How can we grow our church” can never take priority over the question “How can our church remain faithful to God’s Word.” To prioritize growth in numbers over faithfulness is to promote the wide gate leading to destruction. Sadly, many “churches” have forfeited their ability to point those in need of a Savior to Jesus because they recognize precisely what Jesus was saying in these verses. They will see greater numerical growth if they lead people through the wide gate. That path is easier, but it leads to destruction. If your church is to be used by the Holy Spirit to lead the lost to life, it must remain faithful to God’s Word, even if it means the apparent loss of numerical growth.

The same principle is true as you share your faith with others. It is natural to yearn for the person you are sharing with to turn to Christ in faith. If you are not careful, this desire can tempt you to compromise the truth of the gospel in an attempt to “widen” the way that leads to life, but this widening is not possible. Salvation is based upon the exclusivity of Jesus Christ, and true followers of Christ cannot reject the parts of Jesus’s message, which are identical to the message of the entire Bible, that they do not like.

❓: *How does Matthew 7:21 limit the test given in Matthew 7:20?*

❓: *Do the subjects in Matthew 7:21–23 know they are failing to do the will of the Father?*

Matthew 7:21–23 is one of the most foreboding passages in the Bible. There will be those who, on the day of judgment, will offer their works as proof of their commitment to God and Jesus Christ, but Jesus will claim He does not know them. These verses limit the application of the test found in Matthew 7:20. Good works, or good “fruit,” may be evidence of a follower of Jesus, but these good works do not constitute faith itself. Nor are good works able to save. There will be those who give every outward indication of following Jesus, but their good works merely cover a life that is not committed to seeking God’s will.

❓: *How are unbelievers able to masquerade as followers of Jesus?*

❓: *How can we best ensure that we are doing the will of the Father?*

APPLICATION POINT – Throughout this lesson, we have seen the importance of holding everything God says in the Bible together. We cannot attach ourselves to the parts we like and ignore the rest. Such an inconsistent approach to God’s Word will lead many people to find themselves in the disastrous scenario we see in Matthew 7:21–23. As followers of Jesus, we must also be wary of being seduced by sensationalism. It is easy for false teaches to gravitate to one of the Bible’s teachings and give the impression of biblical fidelity in one area. Jesus anticipates many will prophesy, cast out demons, and do many mighty works—all in His name. If we are given to sensationalism, we will be easily deceived, but if we look beyond the sensational and demand complete biblical fidelity, we will be able to see through the façade of religious drama to discern whether someone is being authentic to the entirety of Scripture.

3. BUILDING ON THE ROCK

■ MATTHEW 7:24–29

Q: *What kind of analogy does Jesus use to show the difference between those who hear and receive His words versus those who do not?*

Q: *What do the rain, floods, and winds illustrate in Jesus's analogy?*

Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount by encouraging His listeners to hear and apply His message using a construction metaphor to illustrate His plea. Just as a house built upon solid ground can withstand even the most extreme weather patterns, a life built upon His teachings will be able to withstand trials and temptations. The key is holding fast to what Jesus teaches.

One element of Jesus's metaphor warrants further elaboration. The reference to the rain, floods, and winds obviously represents trials of some kind, but Jesus does not explain these in detail. Apart from such additional guidance, it is best to leave the hardships Jesus has in mind open to a broad range of possibilities believers may encounter. These hardships could include physical suffering from disease or illness or even persecution. They could also include the challenges created by the mundane nature of life. Whatever the case, Jesus said a life built on the foundation of His message will be able to withstand these hardships.

Q: *What assurance do Jesus's words offer His followers?*

Q: *What kind of hardships are you currently facing? How can the Sermon on the Mount help you face these hardships?*

APPLICATION – No one likes to think about, much less experience, hardships. Oftentimes, Christians reason that hardship is a sign of God's disfavor. They believe they are undergoing hardship because they have been unfaithful to God's Word. In some instances, they may be right. Living in a way that is contrary to God's Word often invites unnecessary hardship into our lives. This passage, however, does not allow us to think that hardships always stem from disregarding God's Word. Instead, Jesus claims God's Word is the anchor that will help us endure the hardships we inevitably encounter. No matter what kind of hardship we face, whether physical or emotional,

internal or external, we need to commit to persevering in our faith with the help of God's Word. The Sermon on the Mount, along with the rest of God's Word, provides us with the sure foundation needed to live for God in times of trial and in times of prosperity.

Q: *What does it mean that Jesus taught with authority?*

Q: *What is the general attitude toward authority in our society?*

At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew remarks that the crowds were astonished by Jesus's teaching because He taught with authority, unlike the scribes. "Authority" in these verses refers to the right to influence others in both their thinking and their actions. This comment on authority endorses Jesus's message, but more importantly, it establishes a connection between Him and God. Only God possesses absolute authority, but Jesus was teaching within this authority.

Q: *How should God's authority influence your daily life?*

Q: *Why does our culture demean authority?*

APPLICATION POINT – The concept of "authority" is under fire within our society. There have always been those who challenge authority, but in the past it has typically amounted to the challenger wanting to gain authority over the establishment. The rebel wants to overthrow those in authority in order to gain it for himself. In recent years, however, there has been a shift in the way people challenge authority. Now, it is common to object to any semblance of authority as an attempt to suppress others. The idea is not to struggle for authority but to rid the world of any and all authorities as the only way to ensure the weak and vulnerable are not exploited by those who would grab power. Of course, the vacuum created by the absence of authority is never filled with the justice promised for all. Instead, it just makes exploitation that much easier. Such an attitude toward authority is clearly out of step with a biblical worldview, primarily because the Bible recognizes that God and God alone stands in the place of supreme authority

over His creation. As Christians, we need to embrace the authority of God in our lives. That includes receiving God's Word and even respecting the authorities He has put in place.

NEXT STEPS

The Sermon on the Mount is filled with practical illustrations and easily understood teachings. After studying this lesson, review some of the application points from the previous two lessons, as well as this one. How have you done in applying these application points? If needed, renew your commitment to Jesus's teachings on the Sermon on the Mount. Living in obedience to Jesus's teachings does not require us to move mountains.

PRAY

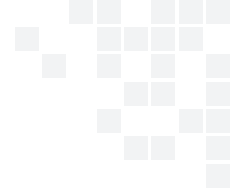
+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

God, help me to speak correctly into a lost world.

Father, help me to avoid hypocrisy.

Lord Jesus, show me the narrow gate and help me to walk that path.

Lord, may I bear fruit in keeping with repentance.



■ LIFE OF JESUS

May 2, 2021 | *Jesus Heals the Sick and Raises the Widow's Son*

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

- Reflect on how your faith in Jesus is demonstrated when you face times of great need.
- Read Luke 7:1–17.
- Pray that God would multiply your faith so that you are eager to go to Him in times of need.

THIS WEEK

■ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Jesus responds to great faith and great need.

■ THEOLOGY APPLIED

The gospel shows us how to depend on Jesus in every area of our lives. We are constantly in need of His grace in our lives. Jesus utilizes our faith to work His grace in us.

■ MEDITATE

“When Jesus heard these things, he marveled at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, said, ‘I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith’” (Luke 7:9).

GETTING STARTED

+ *Use this section to prepare your heart for the truths you will encounter this week and to connect this passage's main point to your own life.*

Q: *What principles do you use to seek the approval of others?*

Q: *How can applying these same principles to win Jesus's approval endanger our relationship with Him?*

How can I get through to you?! Many parents feel like they utter this line multiple times a day to their children. This same sentiment can also arise between managers and employees, doctors and patients, and essentially any other kind of relationship we form. When we have an urgent or important message to communicate, we want to make sure we do it with the gravity we intend. But we often struggle to communicate the most important messages well.

When it comes to our relationship with Jesus, we want to ensure that our message gets through to Him because He is the one who forgives and breaks the power of sin, which is always the biggest problem we face. But how can we get through to Jesus? How can we ensure He sees and hears how dire our message is? This might seem like a strange question to ask. We know Jesus as the risen Lord who is seated at the right hand of the Father (Ephesians 1:20). We have instant access to our Savior, and we need not worry whether He understands how dire our situation is (Ephesians 2:18). Nevertheless, the Gospels record instances when Jesus was particularly moved by what He encountered in those who sought Him. If we are seeking Jesus on His terms, we can learn a great deal from these episodes. This lesson focuses on two such encounters. We will see that Jesus responded to great faith and to great need.

Q: *How do you typically approach Jesus in prayer?*

Q: *How would you correlate the notion of respect with your understanding of God?*

APPLICATION POINT – When I was in college, there was a fad among Christian students, particularly young Christian men, to give the impression that Jesus would fit seamlessly into their friendship circles. The idea was not that they were particularly holy or pious but that He was relatable with His followers. “Jesus is my homeboy” was the popular slogan that expressed this trend. Jesus is astonishingly familiar to His followers, but this “Jesus is my homeboy” movement perhaps risks taking a wonderful concept in Christian thought to the point of being

out of balance within the entirety of the biblical witness. The centurion certainly did not express this cavalier attitude toward Jesus. As you reflect on approaching Jesus this week, consider whether the way you approach Him reflects the truth that He holds the entire universe together. Conversely, you may need consider whether you fully appreciate the nearness of Jesus. The incarnation shows us that He yearns to reach out to those in desperate need of Him.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+In Luke 7:1–17, we see Jesus responding to great faith and to great need. Neither story demands that these are prerequisites for Jesus to act, but they show how much Jesus valued these qualities among those He ministered to.

1. APPROACHING JESUS IN FAITH

2. APPROACHING JESUS WITH GREAT NEED

GOING DEEPER

+ *This section will study the stories of the centurion and the bereaved widow in greater detail. Doing so will illustrate the love of Jesus for those who would follow Him.*

1. APPROACHING JESUS IN FAITH

■ LUKE 7:1–10

Q: *Why did the centurion send for Jesus?*

Q: *Who did the centurion send to Jesus?*

It is always beneficial to “know somebody.” Often, jobs are filled by people who have a personal connection with someone already involved in the company. If you have car trouble, you can save a lot of money by handling the repairs with a friend. Knowing the right people can make life easier and open doors that would have otherwise been

closed. It is possible this scenario motivated the centurion's decision to send a group of respected Jews to Jesus on his behalf. He may have thought that Jesus, being Himself a Jew, would respond more favorably to His own countrymen than a military leader from among the Gentile people ruling over Israel. Jesus did not condemn these actions in this passage, and He did acquiesce to this request. It is not the Jewish cohort that amazed Jesus in this passage, however. Jesus is not impressed by the company we keep, our race, our standing in the community, or any number of other things. While "knowing somebody" may be the way we look for help in our modern society, this approach does not seem to be what moved Jesus to action.

Q: *What false ideas about winning Jesus's and/or God's approval do you encounter?*

Q: *How does approaching Jesus in ways other than what is described in Scripture sabotage the Holy Spirit's work in your life?*

APPLICATION POINT – Perhaps the biggest misconception about God on the part of people who are open to religious ideology but are not confessional Christians is the idea that salvation is tied to moralism. The idea is that God will judge favorably if a person's good actions outweigh their bad actions. The problem, of course, is this idea is absent from the gospel of Jesus Christ. Salvation is not based on our actions but on the work of Christ. Prepare an adequate defense of the truth of the gospel that you can share when you encounter people who are deceived by moralism. Make sure your defense is adaptable. Sometimes, you may have the person's attention for only a few seconds. Other times, you will be able to have a much fuller conversation. Whatever the occasion, make sure you can adequately share your faith with those who need it.

Q: *Why did the Jews argue that the centurion was worthy of Jesus's intervention?*

Q: *What was Jesus's reaction to their request?*

The Jews in Capernaum thought very highly of the centurion. Typically, the Jews resented having Roman soldiers in their country, but this centurion had taken numerous steps to establish a good reputation with

them. He had built the local synagogue and also expressed his admiration for Judaism. For these reasons, the Jews were eager to intercede on his behalf.

The problem is that the logic of the Jewish leaders effectively circumvents the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. The Jews claimed that the centurion was worthy of Jesus fulfilling his request, but if he were worthy, then was Jesus in some sense obligated to act? It is almost as if these Jewish leaders felt the centurion was owed a favor in response to his generosity. Jesus did not respond negatively to their perception, but the centurion's generosity to the Jews is not mentioned again. This should at least cause us to wonder whether the Jews were working with a faulty understanding of grace and faith. We are given further reason to question their outlook when the centurion's own testimony calls that idea into question. The centurion claimed he was not worthy to have Jesus entering his house. The centurion certainly did not think his generosity toward the Jewish community placed any obligation on Jesus. The way the Jewish leaders framed this situation undermined the nature of the centurion's faith and Jesus's grace. Jesus did not owe the centurion anything, but He was eager to respond favorably to the type of faith the centurion showed.

Q: *What makes us worthy of Jesus's work in our lives?*

Q: *How do you limit God's ability to show grace in your life?*

APPLICATION POINT – When we operate according to worldly principles, we often circumvent God's grace in our lives. Many people want to approach God on the terms of quid pro quo. They offer to change their lives for the better or give generously to the poor in exchange for God meeting their need. "God, if you help me land this job, I'll go to church more often and give money to the church." This principle may be commonplace in the world, but it does not work as a frame for our engagement with God. For starters, humans are notoriously abysmal at keeping up their end of the deal. It turns out that loving and serving God cannot be faithfully accomplished on a contractual basis. But more fundamentally problematic is that such a bargain with God denies the opportunity for God to demonstrate His grace. If God is contractually obligated to give us what we are due, then we will never feel the joy of being loved by Him. He offers us much more than this! Do you ever approach God in this manner? Even if not so blatant, does this mindset form the framework for how you deal with Him? If so, pray that He would help you to trust in His grace and approach Him in love. We need God's grace in our lives more than we need our own determination or craftiness.

Q: *What was the centurion trying to communicate when he compared Jesus's authority to his own?*

Q: *How did the centurion's words demonstrate great faith?*

When he heard that Jesus was on the way to his home, the centurion sent his servants to Him with a message. The message essentially compared the authority of Jesus with that of the centurion. In both cases, their wills were absolute. They spoke and others listened and obeyed. If we are not careful, however, we can miss why Jesus was so amazed by the centurion's faith. The centurion had authority over the soldiers under his command. The subject of Jesus's authority is not explicitly mentioned, but we must remember what the centurion was requesting. He wanted his servant to be healed and spared from death. When he expressed his confidence in Jesus's authority, he acknowledged that sickness and death are subject to Jesus's authority in the same way his soldiers were subject to his authority. This truly is remarkable faith in the authority of Jesus Christ!

Q: *How does your faith compare with the centurion's?*

Q: *Where do you go in times of great need?*

APPLICATION POINT – “The only things certain in life are death and taxes.” Such expressions acknowledge the absolute pervasiveness of death in our world. Although the centurion's servant was spared on this occasion, he did eventually die. So did the centurion. And the rest of their generation. Sometimes, death can seem like such a certainty that Christians struggle to pray boldly on behalf of others. Yet the centurion did, and Jesus was amazed by his faith. The Gospels often show us the need to pray for faithfulness even in the face of death, but this passage shows us we should also never hesitate to ask God to intercede miraculously on behalf of those facing sickness and death. God can certainly respond affirmatively to such prayers. The key for us is maintaining a proper balance. We need to recognize the certainty of death, at least until Jesus returns, and pray for faithfulness, but we also need to recognize the authority of our Savior even over sickness and death. As you pray for others over the coming months, seek to maintain this balance. For many of you, this may mean praying boldly for Jesus's healing hand.

Q: *Did Jesus ever meet the servant?*

Q: *How many times did someone intercede for someone else in this story?*

The centurion's servant was saved from death, but Jesus never met him—or even the centurion! On three different occasions in this passage, we see intercession being made on the behalf of others. The centurion interceded for his servant. The Jews sent by the centurion interceded for him. The servants interceded for the centurion a second time. This repeated emphasis certainly demonstrates the importance of intercession among those seeking to be faithful to Christ.

Q: *Who do you know in need of the work of Jesus Christ?*

Q: *How can you intercede to Christ on behalf of others?*

APPLICATION POINT – Christians can follow the pattern demonstrated in this passage by praying on behalf of others. This is known as intercessory prayer, and the Bible contains many examples of such prayers. Since prayer is often the mechanism through which God releases His power into the world, one of the greatest acts of kindness we can do for others is to pray on their behalf. If you want to become more intentional in intercessory prayer, seek to form some prayer groups in your church. Such groups allow for mutual prayers to be lifted to God and are a great illustration of how we should serve one another through prayer.

2. APPROACHING JESUS THROUGH GREAT NEED

■ LUKE 7:11–17

Q: *Why was the woman in this story in great need?*

Q: *How did Jesus respond to her need?*

The woman Jesus encountered in Nain was in great need. She had already lost her husband, and now her only son had also died. In a patriarchal society, this woman would have been in great need without a husband or a son to care for her. In addition to her physical need, she would have been faced with enormous emotional needs as well. Rather than approaching Jesus, Jesus approached her to meet her need. Jesus, with very little fanfare, spoke, and the son was raised from the dead. Luke draws considerable attention to Jesus's emotional investment in this woman. He was stirred with compassion and told her not to weep. This was a bold thing to say to someone who has just lost a family member, but Jesus recognized that the reason for her mourning would soon be resolved.

Q: *Are you willing to go to Jesus with your needs?*

Q: *How are you able to show compassion to those who are in need?*

APPLICATION – Jesus demonstrated amazing compassion to this needy widow. Followers of Jesus need to show the same capacity for compassion. You cannot raise loved ones from the grave, but you can meet many needs by having compassion upon those who are mourning. This will look different in every case. Some people will want someone to weep with them. Others may simply want companionship for a few hours. Whatever the case, be prepared to meet people in their needs.

Q: *How did the people describe Jesus after He raised the widow's son?*

Q: *What response did Jesus's miraculous deed incite?*

In raising the widow's son, Jesus took up the prophetic mantle of the prophet Elijah, who also raised a widow's son back to life (1 Kings 17:17–24). In recording this episode from Jesus's ministry Luke established a connection between Him and the prophets of the Old Testament.

Q: *Why was it important for Luke to establish this link between Jesus and Elijah?*

Q: *What value do you place on the Old Testament?*

APPLICATION POINT – Christians believe in the divine inspiration of both the Old and New Testaments. But in many cases, Christians struggle to see the importance of the Old Testament. This passage, however, shows continuity between the two testaments. Jesus picked up the ministry begun by Elijah and will bring that ministry to its conclusion. During your devotional times this week, if you are reading in the Old Testament, look for more points of connection between Jesus's followers and the Bible.


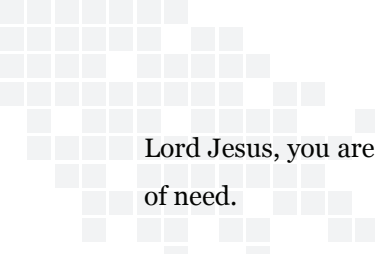
NEXT STEPS

Christians are often far more at home in this world than we would like to think. When we react to the problems we face, we often do it in our own strength rather than seeking God's wisdom and grace. Think about two or three significant problems or decisions you have made over the past month. In what ways did you seek God's aid through those problems? In what ways did you rely on worldly wisdom? Try to anticipate two or three problems you might face in the coming months. What would it look like to bring these issues before a gracious and wise God instead of seeking to solve it on your own? Being prepared for future challenges may help you meet them more faithfully.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

Father, help me to identify when worldly wisdom is leading me away from your grace.



Lord Jesus, you are full of grace and compassion for those who are in need of you. Help me to flee to you in times of need.

God, help me to intercede on behalf of others.

Lord, help me not to approach you with worldly wisdom but as one who needs grace and forgiveness.

■ LIFE OF JESUS

May 9, 2021 | *Parable of the Sower*

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

- What makes you receptive to an idea or claim?
- What makes you enthusiastic about an idea or a claim?
- Read Mark 4:1–20.
- Ask God to prepare your heart to receive the message of His Word.

THIS WEEK

■ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Not everyone will be receptive to Jesus's message, but only those who are prepared to hear it.

■ THEOLOGY APPLIED

Cultivate the soil of your soul to be open to the teachings of Jesus.

■ MEDITATE

"But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold" (Mark 4:20).

GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart for the truths you will encounter this week and to connect this passage's main point to your own life.

Q: *What can cause something to not have its intended effect?*

Q: *How can some actions be beneficial even if they do not have the intended effect?*

Binoculars are remarkable inventions. Such a simple device can multiply our capabilities and allow us to gather information that would otherwise require much more effort or even be impossible altogether. But have you ever tried to use a pair of standard binoculars at night? The power of a pair of binoculars is nullified by the absence of light. A similar situation occurs in Mark 4:1–20. The message of Jesus can transform a person's life but only if the person's heart is able to receive the Word. The power of the Word is limited by hearts that cannot receive it.



Q: *How can you prepare your heart to be transformed by the Word?*

Q: *In what ways are you prohibiting or limiting the power of God's Word in your life?*

APPLICATION POINT – There may be a number of factors sabotaging the power of God's Word in your life. Jesus covered several possibilities in this passage, which we will discuss in more detail below. One way you may be sabotaging the power of God's Word is by failing to recognize it for what it is. God's Word is the perfect revelation of His will. The message concerning Jesus Christ will impart life to your soul. If you treat the Bible, which is the Word of God revealed to us in written form, as an ancient artifact, just good advice, or one religious perspective among many, it will never have the intended effect on your life. Before going further in this study, make sure you are receiving His Word for what it is. Pray that God would create in you a heart of simple submission to His Word.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Mark 4:1–20 is sometimes referred to as “The Parable of the Sower.” A more fitting title may be “The Parable of the Soils” because in the parable Jesus used different soil types to illustrate the different ways people receive His message.

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1. ILLUSTRATING GOD'S MESSAGE
 2. BE AWARE OF SATAN
 3. BE PREPARED FOR HARDSHIP
 4. BE READY TO SACRIFICE
 5. BE READY TO REAP THE GOOD FRUIT
 6. GUARDING GOD'S MESSAGE

GOING DEEPER

+This section will investigate the four different soil types Jesus used as illustrations. We will also consider the purpose of parables.

1. ILLUSTRATING GOD'S MESSAGE

■ MARK 4:1-3

Q: How was Jesus's audience described when He preached in the boat?

Q: How did Mark say Jesus taught the people?

The Gospels tell us that Jesus attracted a very wide audience—men and women, children and adults, Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor. Such a broad audience would be challenging for most teachers, but not for Jesus. He was wonderfully adept at illustrating the truths He was communicating by using parables. Parables can be considered extended metaphors. Jesus's parables are wide-ranging in terms of form and length. The key to understanding parables is recognizing the point the speaker is trying to illustrate. The pitfall to understanding parables is to overextend their analogies, that is, to assign meaning to more things than the speaker intends. For the parable covered in this lesson, Jesus created several points of connection between His story and the point of His teaching. We know this from the explanation He provided the disciples, who did not understand its meaning. In contrast to the parable of the soils, some parables only intend a single point of connection. Finally, although this section emphasizes the illustrative nature of parables, it is not the only reason Jesus used parables to teach His disciples. As we will discuss in the last point in this lesson, parables illustrate the truth of Jesus's message for some people but obscure His message for others.

Q: *How can Jesus's habit of using parables inform us when teaching Christian doctrine to others or when sharing our faith?*

Q: *What does Jesus's willingness to use parables say about His concern for His audience?*

APPLICATION POINT – As Christians, we are responsible for passing on our faith. This includes in smaller groups within your church, with your family members, and to unbelievers. When we are passing along our beliefs, we need to follow Jesus's example and consider our audience. We need to make sure we are effective at teaching our faith and able to illustrate the truths of the gospel with others. This week think of how you can illustrate the gospel through something you encounter in your everyday life. Share these illustrations within your group. Building up your repertoire of illustrations will better prepare you to teach your faith to others and to share your faith with nonbelievers.

2. BEWARE OF SATAN

■ MARK 4:4, 15

Q: *What happened to the seed that fell on the path?*

Q: *How does the path provide a perfect illustration for Jesus's point?*

Jesus's parable of the sower illustrates how people respond differently to the Word of God. Jesus illustrated His point by describing the sowing or planting of a field. Each type of soil in this parable represents a way to receive the good news of Christ, and the seed scattered by the sower represents the Word of God.

Jesus's explanation of the first soil type may catch many modern readers off guard. We are not used to thinking about Satan or His activities. In fact, many modern people do not even believe in the existence of the arch enemy of God. Yet, Jesus clearly warned His listeners that there will be some who hear the God's Word but never take it into their hearts because of Satan's evil influence.

It is difficult to understand in what way these hearers of the Word are under Satan's influence. It is unlikely that all of them would describe themselves as followers of Satan, but Jesus at least intends to show that they remain under Satan's dominion. They are under his rule as they go about their lives (Ephesians 2:2–3).

Q: *How can we protect ourselves from the influence of Satan and his allies?*

Q: *How can we differentiate between the influence of Satan and our own sinful desires?*

APPLICATION POINT – While biblically faithful Christians should believe in Satan's existence, we need to be cautious about too quickly identifying him as the source of every hostile act against God's creation. Oftentimes, we, as sinful human creatures, need little encouragement to act in astonishingly wicked ways. The key to resisting Satan's influence does not rest on differentiating between his wickedness and our sinfulness. The key is simply committing to love God more and ourselves less. Those who love God are not under the influence of His enemy. The other side of this coin is hating personal sin more. If we hate sin, we are not under the influence of God's enemy. This week, in an effort to resist the evil influence of the devil and flee to the majesty of God, make a list of three ways you could love God more and identify three personal sins to fight against. Put these actions into practice and reflect upon how well you have done at the end of the week.

3. BE PREPARED FOR HARDSHIP

■ **MARK 4:5–6, 16–17**

Q: *What was the problem with the seed cast onto the rocky soil?*

Q: *How does this soil type correspond to the reception of God's Word?*

Jesus described the next type of soil as rocky. Although the seed has a chance to germinate this time, it does not have the ability to take root. Since all the growth for these plants can be focused upwards, these plants often grow quickly. But without an adequate root system, it cannot survive. Jesus related the rocky soil to those who hear the Word and receive it gladly for a time, but they quickly abandon the faith when hardships arise. Just as the seeds sprouting up from the rocky soil are not deeply rooted, those who abandon God's Word at the first sign of hardship are not deeply committed to their faith.

In Jesus's mind, trials and tribulations are an inevitable part of the Christian life. His followers will live in a manner that either invites persecution from the outside or sets them apart from non-believers. In fact, Jesus tied these hardships to their acceptance of the Word! Receiving the Word means inviting hardship into your life, and when the hardships eventually come, those who are not deeply committed to their faith will not persist in their belief.

❏: *How can you deepen your commitment to Jesus Christ?*

❏: *How can you prepare yourself for facing the hardships that will come from your faith in Jesus?*

APPLICATION – The word “coasting” implies moving with as little effort as possible, often content to allow other influences to determine your direction and final destination. Students often feel as though they are coasting to the end of their semester once their major papers and exams are completed. As retirement approaches, some employees look to coast through their final few weeks or months by avoiding major problems and obstacles.

Many people apply this mindset to their faith. They want to coast through the Christian life attending church but never getting involved, owning a Bible but rarely reading it, giving a few dollars to the offering but never truly sacrificing. Churches are filled with coasters. They are the perfect example of the rocky soil Jesus described. They are not committed to their Christian faith, and when hardship comes, they will easily abandon it.

If you are coasting through your Christian life, even if you would never have described it that way, now is the time to commit deeply to your faith and to the ministry of your church. Pursue spiritual disciplines such as Bible reading, prayer, and evangelism. Seek out ministries of your church that you could serve in. Deepen your commitment to your faith and your church so that when hardships come, you will be firmly rooted in your beliefs.

4. BE READY FOR SACRIFICE

■ MARK 4:7, 18-19

Q: *What keeps the seeds that fall among the thorns from bearing fruit?*

Q: *What did Jesus compare the thorny soil to?*

The next type of soil is described as thorny. It is not so much the quality of the soil but what the soil is producing that is the problem. The seeds thrown into this soil germinate and take root, but they cannot produce fruit because the thorns are depleting the resources of the soil.

Jesus used this soil type to describe people who are committed to their Christian faith but also committed to so many other things that they cannot bear the fruit He desires. In His explanation, He described the competing commitments in a variety of ways, but the one thing they have in common is that they monopolize the person's time to the extent that they cannot serve Jesus. Those who are like the seed scattered among the thorns love other things more than they love Jesus.

Q: *Are worldly concerns monopolizing your time to the extent that you cannot serve Jesus?*

Q: *How can you eliminate worldly concerns from your life?*

APPLICATION POINT – Many Christians have become so distracted by all the world has to offer that they can no longer serve Jesus in the way He demands. We work long hours, enroll in too many classes, sign our children up for too many afterschool programs and sports leagues. We fill our daily routines with task after task. When we finally reach the end of one day, we have to get ready for the next. If we are lucky, we might have a minute to unwind. Such a lifestyle can hardly bear the type of fruit Jesus desires. This week consider if there are any activities you need to back

away from in order to prioritize your relationship with Jesus. Serving Jesus and producing fruit take time. Unless you want to be choked by the “demands” of life, you need to learn to prioritize your faith.

5. BE READY TO REAP GOOD FRUIT

■ MARK 4:8, 20

Q: *What does the seed falling on good soil represent?*

Q: *What is the result of sowing seed on good soil?*

The final type of soil is referred to as the good soil. The seed sown in the good soil germinates, grows into a healthy plant, and reproduces itself. The good soil represents those who hear and accept the message of Jesus. They receive the gospel, and it transforms their life so they grow and mature spiritually.

The good soil has implications far beyond the original seed. The plant that grows from the seed is able to reproduce itself thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and a hundredfold. Accepting the gospel has implications beyond our own spiritual life. The transformation the gospel brings is missional. We carry the gospel everywhere we go and share it with others. The gospel can then have that same missional transformation in the lives of others if they are good soil, and they will become a gospel-bearing witness to the world. If you are not reproducing yourself, is it possible that your soil is not as healthy as it was when you first received Jesus Christ?

Q: *How can you keep up your “soil” so that your spiritual life continues to thrive?*

Q: *How is the missional element of the good soil currently reflected in your life?*

APPLICATION POINT – In agriculture, good soil does not always happen on its own, and good soil does not always remain good. It has to be actively tilled and cultivated or what once produced good fruit will not be able to produce anything. This is an appropriate extension of Jesus’s point. God is ultimately the one who prepares our

hearts for the gospel, but we need to make sure we are working to maintain our spiritual health throughout our lives. We need to continually cultivate our own soil. This is done by loving God more and more each day. Loving Him can express itself in a variety of ways, just as the health of a plant is evident in a variety of ways. For example, a strong commitment to missions is evidence of a healthy and growing spiritual life. Make sure that you are looking for signs of a healthy spiritual life and seeking ways to grow in your faith.

6. GUARDING GOD'S MESSAGE

■ MARK 4:9–13

Q: *What additional purpose of parables is emphasized in these verses?*

Q: *What determines whether a parable illustrates or obscures the truth of Jesus's message?*

The Gospels contain some teachings that are hard for believers to understand. We typically view the teaching of Jesus as open for anyone willing to listen. Jesus's use of parables is partly explained, however, by His desire to obscure His message. His message was not for everybody, but only those given the spiritual insight to understand. Even the disciples often failed to understand the meaning of Jesus's parables.

It can be challenging to define precisely how parables helped to obscure Jesus's message because the correlation between Jesus's parables and the spiritual truth He was teaching is easy enough for us to understand. The key is to remember that Jesus was teaching an audience unfamiliar with the points He was making, and the Gospel writers were writing for an audience far closer to the time of Jesus. Although the point of Jesus's parables may seem obvious to us, this may not have been the case for a typical person passing by where Jesus taught. To them, Jesus seemed to be telling a story about farming. Even if they had a hunch that He was talking about something deeper, they may not have been able to identify precisely what it was. As Christianity grew, some challengers may have claimed that the early Christians were distorting Jesus's message. By including Jesus's parables within the Gospels and an explanation for why He used parables, the Gospel writers showed the consistency between Jesus and the early Christian message.

Q: *How should we follow Jesus's example of reserving His message for those who will understand?*

Q: *If parables are meant to obscure the message of Jesus, how can we be sure we are truly understanding His parables?*

APPLICATION POINT – When discussing our faith with others, it is often tempting to compromise the teachings of the gospel to make our faith more appealing. This is the opposite of what Jesus did here. He made His message more challenging to understand. Jesus targeted people who would truly believe in the Christian faith. When we are trying to share our faith with others, we cannot compromise our faith to make it more appealing. Compromise will not make more Christians. It will only make more confused people who are still deeply lost in their sin. Compromise also makes us a poor witness for the gospel.

NEXT STEPS

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was teaching His followers how to live for eternity. His teaching requires us to adopt some countercultural practices and mindsets. If we are living for the life to come, we cannot live like this life is all there is. If we are living for the life to come, we will hold strong to our Christian commitments even in the face of severe persecution. If we are living for the life to come, we will pursue righteousness instead of seeing how far we can run toward sin before falling into it. The broad principle to be adopted from the Sermon on the Mount is to live now in a way that prioritizes the life to come. Seek to put this principle into practice in your life.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

God, prepare me to share your Word engagingly with others.

Father, keep me from coasting through the Christian life. Help me to be fully committed to serving you.

God, help me to see the worries and concerns of this life that are consuming me.

Jesus, help me never to compromise your message. Make me a faithful witness who bears much fruit.

■ LIFE OF JESUS

May 16, 2021 | Parable of the Seeds

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

- Write down how you understand the phrase “kingdom of God.”
- Read Mark 4:26–34.
- Pray for God to help you apply this passage to your life.

THIS WEEK

■ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

God is the one who makes His kingdom grow.

■ THEOLOGY APPLIED

Our role in God’s kingdom is not found in understanding but in faithfulness.

■ MEDITATE

“[The kingdom of God] is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.” (Mark 4:31–32)

GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart for the truths you will encounter this week and to connect this passage’s main point to your own life.

Q: *How would you describe your role in growing God's kingdom?*

Q: *Why should we want God's kingdom to grow?*

“That is out of my hands.” This oft-repeated line means the success or failure of an endeavor depends not on us but on some factor beyond our control. One of the primary points of Mark 4:26–34 is that the growth of the kingdom of God is ultimately out of our hands. We do not decide how the kingdom will grow. Its growth does not depend on our effort. Many of us have trouble letting go of things. Not being in control of an outcome or a process worries us. But when it comes to the growth of the kingdom of God, we must remember that the kingdom does not belong to us. We participate in building it, but God's kingdom is not our project. We should feel relieved that such a task does not depend on us. The kingdom of God is far beyond our ability to direct. And in addition to being overcontrolling, many of us also have far too much confidence in our ability to hold things together. If you feel like the weight of the kingdom is on your shoulders, Jesus's words in Mark 4:26–34 are directed toward you.

Q: *Why do we struggle with giving up control of things that are beyond our control?*

Q: *Does freedom from control imply freedom from responsibility?*

APPLICATION POINT – Sometimes, the phrase “out of my hands” implies a release from all responsibility or concern. The growth of the kingdom is out of our hands, but we still are responsible for remaining faithful to God's calling to share our faith and make disciples. The fate of a patient in an operating room is out of the doctor's hands, but the doctor is still responsible for providing competent medical care. As you study Jesus's teachings in this passage, seek the appropriate balance between freeing yourself from a burden you cannot bear and being faithful to maintaining your witness to a lost world.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+In Mark 4:26–34, Jesus continued the use of parables. In this passage, He discussed the nature of the kingdom of God.

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1. HOW THE KINGDOM GROWS
 2. BELIEVING IN THE KINGDOM
 3. GUARDING THE KINGDOM

GOING DEEPER

+This section will investigate Mark 4:26–34 to understand Jesus’s message concerning the kingdom of God.

1. HOW THE KINGDOM GROWS

■ MARK 4:26–29

Q: *What does the seed represent in this parable?*

Q: *What are the responsibilities of the person in this parable?*

This parable may seem very familiar after having studied the parable of the soils last week. The subject is again a sower, and he is again sowing seed. And like the previous parable, the seed represents the message of Jesus Christ and, especially once the seed sprouts, the believing citizen of the kingdom.

In this parable, however, the focus is not on the type of soil the seed is sown in but on the two roles of the sower. He scatters the seed throughout the field and collects the harvest once it is ripe. Jesus said this scattering of seed compares well to the kingdom of God. The sower corresponds to the followers of Jesus, and the duties of the sower correspond to our role in building God’s kingdom. We share the message about Jesus Christ with others, and we guide them to faith in Christ when they believe.

Q: *How are you sharing the message of Jesus with those who need it?*

Q: *How are you helping to disciple new believers in Jesus?*

APPLICATION POINT – The New Testament does not express our call to share our faith in Christ as often as we may think, but personal evangelism is one of the clear implications of this parable. Many modern Christians struggle to consistently share their faith. The conversations can often be uncomfortable or awkward, but one of the reasons for this unease stems from unfamiliarity—both on your part and on the part of the person you are sharing with. As you do it more, much of this discomfort will fade away. Consider starting the conversation this week with someone you feel God prompting you to share your faith with. Our role is to plant the seeds. Pray for God’s help in that role and for Him to work in our faithfulness to share.

Q: *How does kingdom growth occur?*

Q: *Why are seeds an appropriate illustration of the kingdom of God?*

This parable emphasizes the mystery behind the growth of God’s kingdom. Once the seed is sown, the sower does not know or understand how it grows. He can observe it growing. He sees the seed sprout, grow into grain, and ripen until it is ready to be harvested. But he does not know why it happens. In the same way, spiritual growth is ultimately up to God. We can observe other people growing in their faith, but we cannot make them grow. That is not our role in growing God’s kingdom.

Q: *How can you remain faithful to your role in sowing the seed of the gospel?*

Q: *What challenges do you feel when sharing your faith with others?*

APPLICATION POINT – Many of the earliest missionaries, such as William Carey and Adoniram Judson, ministered for years in foreign countries before seeing a single convert to the gospel of Christ. They endured extreme hardships, the loss of family members, and even threats to their own lives, all in a foreign and often hostile culture, all for the sake of sharing the good news of Jesus. These men were well acquainted with the principle in these verses. Although they were faithful to serve, it was God who caused their seed to grow. One thing that sustained them through those difficult times was their commitment to God’s calling on their lives. They knew they had been called to foreign missions. This same strategy can work for us. We are called to be faithful to

sharing our faith. If you are going through long stretches of not seeing the fruit of your labor, focus on remaining faithful to your calling.

2. BELIEVING IN THE KINGDOM

■ MARK 4:30–32

Q: *What does the mustard seed represent in this passage?*

Q: *What does the parable of the mustard seed teach us about the kingdom of God?*

In the next parable Jesus discussed the kingdom of God by drawing attention to a mustard seed. According to Jesus, the mustard seed is the smallest seed, but it grows into the largest of the plants in the garden. He said that the kingdom of God is like this. Jesus was providing hope for His followers. There will be times when it seems as though the kingdom of God is unsubstantial compared to the structures and habits in place in our society. But Jesus taught that the kingdom of God has the potential to far surpass everything the world holds dear.

Q: *How can Christians keep their faith when the kingdom of God still seems small compared to the world?*

Q: *Are there times when you think Christianity will not survive in the modern, secularizing world?*

APPLICATION POINT – In a rapidly secularizing culture, it can sometimes seem that the kingdom of God has no hope of appearing. Even after largely abandoning a Christian ethos, the modern West was still built upon a Christian foundation, but that foundation now appears to be quickly fading away. People not only have a hard time thinking theologically, they also give every indication that theology does not matter. Religious liberty was once considered the first right, but now it is labeled as an excuse for bigotry. Such a trajectory can leave us with

little hope for the arrival of God's kingdom. But Jesus's parable about the mustard seed will not allow for despair. Even though the prospects of the kingdom may seem bleak at the moment, the kingdom of God, like the mustard seed, starts small but will eventually overcome every worldly rival. The parable of the mustard seed gives us the hope we need to maintain our faith in the kingdom of God even in a culture that is quite hostile to it.

Q: *Why is Mark 4:31 difficult scientifically?*

Q: *Can Jesus's claim be true even if it is not scientifically accurate?*

Jesus said the mustard seed is the smallest seed. This statement has drawn some criticism from skeptics who want to challenge the truthfulness of the Bible and the divine nature of Jesus. This statement and the critical response have led many believing Christians to adopt some questionable responses. There is simply no need for any of this.

To be faithful biblical interpreters we need to give the biblical authors and the characters emerging within Scripture the same courtesy we would expect from others evaluating the things we say. This includes reading the text and statements within their intended context. With this statement, Jesus was illustrating a point He was teaching to His audience. He was not making a scientific point. In His historical context, the mustard seed was the smallest seed His audience was familiar with. Thus, it is completely appropriate to refer to this seed as the smallest to illustrate this point to His audience. No one in Jesus's context disputed this statement or performed interpretive gymnastics to make Jesus's words correct according to modern scientific knowledge.

Q: *Why is it important to affirm the truthfulness of Scripture?*

Q: *Why is it important to affirm the truthfulness of Jesus?*

APPLICATION POINT – It is important for us to recognize authorities outside of ourselves. Otherwise, we place ourselves in the position of absolute authority, a role we are not suited for. This is especially true for theological contexts where most modern people want to assert their right to say what they think is true. As Christians, it is

essential for us to embrace the authority of Scripture and of Jesus, and apart from their truthfulness, how could we do that? If we have adopted Scripture as our authority, we need to read it regularly. Do you skip over the Scripture passages when you read these lessons? Do you spend more time reading the lesson than the Bible? If so, commit to prioritizing the reading of Scripture.

Q: *What did Jesus say rested in the branches of the tree from the mustard seed?*

Q: *Why did Jesus include this detail?*

Jesus mentioned birds nesting in the branches of the mustard tree. This observation can be challenging to understand. Was Jesus being poetic or describing some idyllic scene from nature? Jesus's remarks are most likely a reference to a vision contained in Daniel 4.

Daniel 4 describes a vision given to the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar. In this vision, Nebuchadnezzar saw a great tree that spanned the whole earth and gave shade to the animals and rest on its branches to the birds. Then the tree was cut down. The animals fled and the birds flew away.

This allusion to Daniel 4 strengthened Jesus's point substantially. Although the kingdom of God may be small in stature now, the kingdoms of the world come and go, just like ancient Babylon. It is the kingdom of God, however, that will last.

Q: *Do you see more evidence that the kingdom of God or the kingdom man controls our culture right now?*

Q: *How can we build our trust in the kingdom of God and its ultimate victory?*

APPLICATION POINT – There is a growing sense of turmoil in our society. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed how we live. There is growing strife among the nations and within our own nation. The moral and sexual

revolution rages unchecked. As Christians look upon the world before us, it is understandable to wonder if the kingdom of God will ever overcome all we see. But Jesus has given us a subtle reminder that the kingdom of God will always prove more trustworthy than the kingdom of man. We are currently living in the kingdom of man, but we need to live for the kingdom of God. When you find yourself worried about the kingdom of man, train yourself to look to Scripture for encouragement to wait for the kingdom of God.

3. GUARDING THE WORD

■ MARK 4:33–34

Q: *What was Jesus's exclusive teaching method during this time?*

Q: *How did Jesus protect His message?*

Jesus was concerned to protect His message. He protected its vitality by shielding Himself and His disciples from persecution. Without the use of parables Jesus's message would have quickly caught the attention of the Roman authorities. They would not have tolerated the idea of a rival kingdom and would have immediately sought to put down any such opposition. Jesus and His followers could not have expected any better reception from even His own countrymen. Some of them benefitted from the Roman rule. Others were unlikely to have approved of Jesus and would have eagerly betrayed Him to the Romans. Thus, Jesus taught His message discreetly. His parables illustrated His message perfectly while also disguising it sufficiently from those who would not receive it.

Jesus protected the viability of His message by explaining everything to His disciples in private. We need not worry if the disciples misunderstood it. They were able to faithfully pass Jesus's message down to us through Scripture.

Q: *How can you guard the message of Jesus?*

Q: *How can you present the gospel of Jesus in a way that makes it attractive to others?*

APPLICATION – In order to protect the message of Jesus Christ, Christians must ensure that they are beyond reproach morally and ethically. When Christians who are vocal about their faith are discovered living in a manner that is inconsistent with it, they mar the message of Jesus in the eyes of those who wish to detract from it.

Christians also need to ensure that they do not present the teachings of Jesus in a needlessly offensive way. Of course, the gospel of Jesus will inevitably offend those who are hostile to it. But there is a difference between offending with the truth of the gospel and speaking the truth of the gospel in an offensive way. A few years ago, a TV personality made a public stand on an issue pertaining to the Christian faith, but he did so in an obviously offensive way. His comments were taken as offensive in the wider culture. The problem was that it was not clear what they found offensive. Christians should never find themselves in this position.

NEXT STEPS

We can sow seed and reap the harvest, but it is God who makes His kingdom grow. We must pursue all He has called us to do and leave the rest to Him. In what ways are you seeking to sow and reap the harvest? Look for a way to engage your community with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Some of you may consider becoming involved in a need-based ministry, such as crisis pregnancy support. Others may want to engage in a ministry to the homeless. Or you may simply need to become more serious about sharing their faith with those God has placed in your path. However God leads you to engage the culture for Him, remember that your role is to be faithful. Only God can make His kingdom grow.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

God, help me to always represent you well. If others are offended by me, let it be only because they are offended by your message.

Lord, help me to place myself under the authority of your Word.

Lord Jesus, your burden is light. Free me from believing that the progress of your kingdom lies in my hands. Keep me faithful to the role you have called me to.



■ LIFE OF JESUS

May 23, 2021 | Parable of the Weeds

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

- What kind of challenges do you face from living with unbelievers?
- Read Matthew 13:24–30.
- Pray that God would prepare you to live in a world with unbelievers.

THIS WEEK

■ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

For now, both believers and unbelievers live in the world, but when the kingdom of God arrives, they will be sorted and assigned different fates.

■ THEOLOGY APPLIED

Living in the world with unbelievers presents great challenges but also great opportunity.

■ MEDITATE

“Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, ‘Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn’” (Matthew 13:30).

GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart for the truths you will encounter this week and to connect this passage’s main point to your own life.

Q: *What are some key points to remember when interpreting parables?*

Q: *How can we guard ourselves from overextending the meaning of Jesus's parables?*

Sometimes removing what is unwanted is not feasible because it would adversely affect what remains. When I lived in Northern Ireland, I saw what were known as “row houses.” Instead of every house in the city standing on its own with a yard or driveway separating them, they were built immediately adjacent to one another. Some of them are now getting quite old and being condemned by the government, but they simply stand empty, connected to the other homes. I asked a friend why they didn’t just remove these houses from the row to make room for a new construction or just for some space between homes. He said if they did, the houses on either side would cave in. In fact, removing one house would cause a domino effect that would adversely affect several homes on either side. Removing the unwanted home would damage the existing homes too much.

In this lesson, we encounter a parable in which the master of a field does not weed his crops because doing so would remove too much of his grain. At the outset, however, we have to keep the nature of parables in mind. Parables are illustrations of the point the teacher is making. Not every part of the parable corresponds perfectly with the point the teacher is making. For example, the master’s servants in this parable are rather inconsequential to Jesus’s main point. If the master of the field represents God, then it is possible that the servants correspond to His angels, but this connection does little to advance Jesus’s point, which is that God has allowed unbelievers to remain on the earth until the coming of the kingdom of God. Another part of this parable that does not carry over to the point Jesus was making concerns the inability of the master and the servants to remove the weeds from the field. This is an understandable problem for the human characters in the parable, but it certainly does not apply to God. God could, if He willed, easily remove unbelievers from the world.

Q: *What are some examples of situations when removing what is unwanted would cause too much removal of what is wanted?*

Q: *How are these examples like and unlike the parable Jesus gives in Matthew 13:24-30?*

APPLICATION POINT – Jesus’s parables are a gift to believers. Anyone who thinks the Bible is uninteresting or too hard to understand needs only to be introduced to how the Bible’s central figure, Jesus Christ, taught His followers. We do need to be careful when interpreting Jesus’s parables, however. Demanding that every part of a parable correspond to the overall point Jesus was making will detract from His message and result in some odd theological beliefs. One key to interpreting parables well is to support your observations with other Scriptures. This is not foolproof, but at least it will keep you from going too far off-track when examining Jesus’s wonderful explanations of His kingdom.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Matthew 13:24–30 is a parable about the kingdom of God. This lesson will consider the parable under these broad themes.

1. TWO ROADS DIVERGE
2. LIVING WITH NON-BELIEVERS
3. COMMON GRACE
4. THE GREATER BATTLE
5. JUDGMENT

GOING DEEPER

+This section will investigate Matthew 13:24–30 in more detail and draw insights concerning how believers will live with unbelievers in the world.

1. TWO ROADS DIVERGE

■ MATTHEW 13:24–30

Q: *What does the master’s field represent?*

Q: *What do the weeds represent?*

This passage provides an excellent illustration of the importance of interpreting the Bible well. Commentators take two different paths when interpreting these verses. Some relate the master's field to the church and the weeds to unbelievers who participate in the church alongside believers. It is not always possible to distinguish between believers and unbelievers within the church because unbelievers give all appearances of belief. This lesson adopts a different approach to this passage which will be further explained as the lesson progresses.

The key to the interpretation outlined above is identifying the kingdom of heaven with the church, but there is a problem with this approach. Matthew consistently distinguishes between the kingdom of heaven and the church. But Jesus was not discussing the make-up of the church. He was comparing the kingdom of heaven with the master's field. The master's field represents the world with both believers and non-believers in it. Once Jesus returns to inaugurate the kingdom of heaven, the wheat and the weeds will be sorted out. The wheat will be harvested and placed in the master's barn, and the weeds will be separated out and burned.

The differences in application further illustrate the importance of interpreting the biblical text rightly. Your interpretation of the Bible significantly alters how you apply it. For instance, the first interpretation would have an obvious application pertaining to church discipline. The church needs to be wary of unbelievers in its midst and should hold members accountable to living lives consistent with the gospel. This application is certainly biblical, but the problem is if this interpretation is not correct, the application does not rightly stem from this passage. Interpreting the biblical text influences how we apply the Bible to our lives.

❓: *What are some good principles for interpreting the Bible?*

❓: *Why should you question the biblical interpretations offered by others?*

APPLICATION POINT – When considering different interpretations of the Bible, it is important to remember we cannot settle on an interpretation simply because we like it best. We need to look for the interpretation supported by the most evidence. The evidence we look for should include historical information (the historical context of the text), grammatical information (how the words and phrases fit together to convey a message), and theological information (how the main theological beliefs inform your interpretation). Consider doing your own interpretation work for one passage you study in these lessons or one passage you are studying in your church services. Studying Scripture will help your spiritual life, and you will see you are able to gain a lot more from these times when you are learning from others, even if you settled on a different interpretation.

2. LIVING WITH NON-BELIEVERS

Q: *What do the weeds in this parable represent?*

Q: *What does the wheat represent?*

The owner of the field sowed it with good seed, but his enemy later sowed weeds throughout the field. The weeds could not be removed without also removing the good seed, so the master of the field decides to allow the weeds to stay until the time of the harvest.

In this parable, the wheat represents believers and the weeds represent unbelievers. God has allowed unbelievers to remain in the world until the day He inaugurates the kingdom of heaven. Then unbelievers will face judgment while believers will enter the kingdom of heaven. But until the arrival of the kingdom of heaven, believers and unbelievers must exist together in the world.

Q: *How should believers seek to live with unbelievers as they wait for the kingdom of heaven to appear?*

Q: *How can believers remain faithful while facing challenges to their faith from unbelievers?*

APPLICATION POINT – In 1 Thessalonians 4:11–12, Paul writes, “Aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.” Believers need not always live in strife and contention with unbelievers. Of course, this does not mean that believers should abandon their witness to unbelievers. Furthermore, as Christians live in obedience to their faith in an increasingly secular age, conflicts between believers and unbelievers will become more apparent. Christians, however, do not have to look for conflict with unbelievers.

3. COMMON GRACE

Q: *How do the weeds benefit from the wheat?*

Q: *How do unbelievers benefit from living among believers?*

Grace exists in a variety of ways. Christians believe in specific grace, which is what God shows us through Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. When we accept that specific grace, God applies the atonement won by Jesus Christ to our sins so that we may be forgiven.

Christians also believe in common grace, which is a gift from God to every human being. While it does not provide salvation, common grace does allow unbelievers to flourish in unexpected ways. Music and art are examples of common grace. Scientific and medical advances are also examples of common grace. These things are available to everyone and are an indication of God's grace in our lives. In this passage, common grace is illustrated by God's refusal to remove unbelievers before the arrival of the kingdom.

Q: *How should common grace guide our engagement with a secularizing culture?*

Q: *What guidelines should Christians follow to responsibly participate in the cultural production of our society?*

APPLICATION – Christians need not assume that everything stemming from non-believers is bad or that everything not explicitly Christian is bad. Common grace is no less a gift from God than the grace that establishes the forgiveness of our sins in the gospel. Since this is the case, we should be eager to embrace the aspects of our culture that are a pure expression of God's common grace. Christians should feel free to enjoy art, athletic events, and movies provided they do not seek to undercut our faith. Of course, unbelievers often abuse common grace

in ways that believers could clearly never affirm. In such cases, believers should abstain from indulging in non-believing culture.

4. THE GREATER BATTLE

Q: *How did the weeds get into the field?*

Q: *What does the master's enemy refer to in this parable?*

The master sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy sowed the weeds. That the enemy came while the men were asleep shows his cunning nature. He sought to ruin what the master had done. God's enemy seeks to ruin His good creation through the corruption of His kingdom people. The master's enemy would obviously include Satan, God's arch enemy, but we need not assume this identification to be exclusive. The master's enemy likely represents any and every evil that opposes God and His will.

The inclusion of God's enemies within this parable shows us that there is a greater battle being fought than we often realize. When we meet adversity on earth due to our interactions with unbelievers, this is just one part of the larger battle God is waging against those who would rebel against His authority.

Q: *How can we join God in His struggle against those who would oppose Him?*

Q: *How does knowing God is at war help us when we encounter daily struggles*

APPLICATION POINT – This parable reminds us in several ways that there is something bigger going on in the world than we often recognize in our day-to-day existence. We are waiting for the coming of God's kingdom. We witness the ancient struggle against God's authority playing out before us every day. When we encounter struggles, we become so inwardly focused that we rarely stop to think how small our problems are when compared to the

big picture of all God is involved in. This week, when you encounter struggles, try to take a step back and place it into the bigger picture of what God is doing in the universe. It may help you see your struggle as an opportunity to demonstrate God's glory to a world that is in constant opposition to Him.

5. JUDGMENT

Q: *How does the binding and burning of the weeds correlate to God's kingdom?*

Q: *How does the gathering of the wheat into the barn correlate to God's kingdom?*

The final two elements of this parable are not difficult to understand. Although God has allowed unbelievers to remain on the earth until the arrival of His kingdom, when the kingdom does appear, unbelievers will be subject to judgment. At that point, whatever headway they have made on earth will be for nothing. Every good thing done by means of common grace will be for nothing. The struggle against God's reign will be over.

Q: *What should be our response to knowing that unbelievers are heading for eternal judgment apart from Jesus Christ?*

Q: *How does God's judgment add justice to the world?*

APPLICATION – Eternal judgment is not something our society readily embraces, but it is the clear teaching of God's Word. Ignoring it will not make it go away. As we encounter God's justice in this parable, we need two responses. First, we need to be ready to share our faith with those who are rebelling against His authority. Second, we must learn to take solace in God's justice. While judgment is hard for us to accept, the prospects of a world in which justice could not be gained is worse.



NEXT STEPS

Pollsters report that after most general elections most people in our country know few people who voted differently than they did. It is human nature to surround ourselves with people who think and believe and vote like we do. This can present a challenge for us as Christians—we have less access to those who need God the most when we live our lives in an “echo chamber.” Challenge yourself to make a friendship connection with a non-believer this week. Your willingness to do this may change them forever.

PRAY

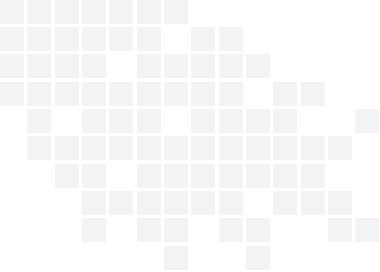
+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God’s Word this week.

God, guide me through the interpretation and application of your Word. Help me to study your Word daily.

Lord, use me as an instrument to take someone from unbelief to belief.

God, help me to see the world with a wider perspective.

Father, thank you for your justice. I long for the day when I can be gathered to you.







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