

***Introduction to
The Sermon
on the Mount***

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The Sermon on the Mount

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Introduction

Matthew chapters 5–7 record a sermon Jesus preached to his followers. Because he went up on a hillside to an out of the way place, it is called the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus' Goal in the Sermon

Jesus wanted prospective followers to understand God's expectations about how they should worship him. Jesus didn't just call for a change in how people acted; he called them to have a new mindset, one that focused on the heart and not simply on outward actions.

The people in his audience were religious and confident that God accepted them. Jesus, however, told them that God expected much more from them and that their current practices fell short. Only by accepting and practicing Jesus' teaching could they "enter the kingdom of Heaven."

Did Jesus Promote Works?

As Christians, we expect Jesus to talk about grace and faith, but those words don't appear in his sermon. In fact, Jesus seemed to say that God accepts us based on what we do. Even more, Jesus set standards that no one—except him—could meet. How should we understand this?

The Jewish Audience

Jesus was a Jew, and during his ministry he spoke only to Jews, with a few exceptions. In addition, *Matthew* wrote his gospel to an audience that was mostly Jewish, and he preserved the Jewish tone of Jesus' message. In order to understand this sermon, we need to know a few basics about the Jews.¹

A Brief History

Around 2100 BC, God called a man named Abraham and promised to make him into a nation. God renamed Abraham's grandson Israel, and Israel had twelve sons. Abraham had a grandson, Jacob, whom God renamed Israel. Israel had twelve sons, and over the next 600 years, the twelve sons grew into the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

In 1446, God used Moses to rescue the Israelites from Egypt and then establish Israel as his chosen nation. God also gave the Israelites 613 commands,² including the Ten Commandments, so that they could worship him and live acceptably before him. The commands fell into two basic groups: how to worship and how to live daily life.

1 What follows is very simplistic.

2 This is the consensus of Jewish scholars.

Worship consisted of mandatory festivals and various offerings. The most important offerings involved animal sacrifices. God is holy, and he demanded that the Israelites be holy. Sin made individuals and the nation guilty; the blood of the animals took away guilt.

Moses wrote five books; these contain history and the commands God had established. The New Testament calls these books the Law of Moses, and they are the cornerstone of the Old Testament.

After this, God led Israel into the land he had promised to Abraham, with each tribe receiving its own portion. Unfortunately, the Israelites generally failed to follow the Law, in spite of God's efforts to guide them. By 700, God had scattered most of the Israelites, and only one tribe, Judah, remained intact. At this point, the Israelites became known as the Jews.

From 600 until Jesus' time, the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans ruled over the Jews, but the Jews endured and clung to God and the Law of Moses.

Jewish Beliefs

Christian beliefs originated from Jewish beliefs, but Jesus' teaching and that of the Apostles brought about changes. These beliefs are the same:

- God and God alone
- God gives salvation, no one can earn it
- His people must trust him
- His people must live godly lives
- Sin must be forgiven by blood

These beliefs changed:

- Individuals share the fate of the nation
 - Born into the nation
 - National guilt, sin, forgiveness
- A godly life consists of doing what the Law says
 - Attend the festivals
 - Make the offerings
 - Follow the rules for daily life
- God's blessings come in this life
 - The Law of Moses had no concept of eternal life
 - After 600, more liberal Jews developed some beliefs about it
 - They hoped that the Christ would come as a warrior-king who would reestablish the Kingdom of Israel and make the Jews rulers of the world

What Jesus Wanted

Jesus wanted to build on the foundation of Jewish beliefs, but he also wanted to radically alter some of them.

First, God would choose individuals rather than the entire nation. Under the Law, all Jews received forgiveness when the Chief Priest made the annual sacrifices on the Day of Atonement. Jesus introduced the idea that God would choose or reject individuals, regardless of whether or not they were Jews.

Second, the Jews believed that godliness consisted of obeying outward commands. Jesus said that God requires a pure heart that overflows into acceptable behavior. Behavior still matters, but God doesn't accept seemingly acceptable behavior coming from evil motivations.

Third, the Jews believed some things about a life or punishment to come, but their hope was for blessings in this life. Jesus called his followers to put their hope in the life to come and gave stern warnings about judgment for those who failed to seek God acceptably.

What About Grace and Faith?

The Jews understood the concept of grace, but they used the word *chosen*. God had chosen Abraham and Israel, not the other way around. They understood that God's acceptance required forgiveness obtained through countless animal sacrifices.

The Jews didn't think about putting their faith in God; instead, they thought about following and obeying him. Jesus, as he focused on a pure heart, gradually introduced the idea of faith to his followers. The Apostles then expanded its importance.

Our Takeaway

Jesus was quite blunt in telling his followers that they *must* practice what he taught or God would reject them. He wanted them to understand that what they were currently doing as Jews wasn't enough. They needed to fully accept and practice his teaching.

Jesus' message to us is the same. Our faith should lead us to *want* to do everything Jesus said. His warnings remind us that a stubborn refusal to practice these things indicates an absence of genuine faith. Without genuine faith, God doesn't extend grace.

At the same time, grace gives us room to admit how much we fall short, repent, and commit ourselves to cooperating with God to bring about change.

About the Translation

I translated *Matthew* 5-7 for this introduction. I did this partly to avoid violating the copyrights of the owners of other translations and partly so I wouldn't end up criticizing their wording. I started with a very word-for-word translation and then smoothed it out slightly to make it readable. It is *not* a paraphrase.

I highlighted the difference between "you" singular—you_{sg}—and "you" plural. In his preaching, Jesus at times addressed the whole audience; other times he addressed a fictional individual whom he accused of some misbehavior. When Jesus did this, the audience clearly knew who he was talking to. In English, "you" needs some assistance.

I also chose to avoid traditional translations of a few words to emphasize the meaning the original audience would have heard.

blessed => favored

Blessed is a good translation of another Greek word that means “said a good word,” as in God *said a good word* about him.

Favored implies that God gives a person special treatment; it could also be translated *privileged*.

righteous, righteousness => godly, godliness

Righteous, in its original meaning, is a valid translation. However, in today’s use, it tends to mean *self-righteous* and implies a conceited and haughty attitude. Someone might boast, “I’m righteous!”

Godly implies doing what’s acceptable in God’s sight rather than in someone’s opinion. To non-Jews, the Greek word meant acting in a socially responsible way. No one would boast by saying, “I’m socially responsible!”

To Jews, it meant practicing the Law. Some Jews would draw attention to how “righteous” they were, and Jesus condemned this. In Jesus’ mind, no one should boast by saying, “I’m doing what God expects!”

hypocrite => grifter

First, grifter is an American slang word that refers to a swindler or con artist. A grifter pretends to be trustworthy to gain people’s confidence and then cheats them.

The Greek word *hypocrite* original meant a stage actor. Over time, *hypocrisy* came to mean the ability move others emotionally while remaining inwardly in control. The Greeks viewed this as a virtue in public speakers, and even today’s preachers do this to some extent so they don’t sound boring.

To the Jews, however, the only purpose for hypocrisy was fraud. It didn’t mean, “You’re not practicing what you preach.” It meant, “You’re out to gain people’s confidence and then cheat them!” When Jesus used this word, it was a strong accusation.

stumble, cause to stumble, offend => ensnare, snare

A Greek word give us the words *scandal*, *scandalize*. Its meaning evolved over time, and translators often use different words to translate it depending on the situation: stumble, stumbling block, offend, source of offense. An early meaning of the word was a trap, or snare, set on the ground that caused people to trip and fall. On an ancient battlefield, this could have fatal consequences. A person who tripped would at least become angry.

In the New Testament, it is mostly used to describe something that causes people to sin or to turn away from Jesus. It could be a temptation, a hardship, a wrong done by someone else, or a difficult teaching. For whatever reason, it put a person's faith at risk. It was a trap, a snare; if a person was caught by it, their faith was at risk.

Other Greek Words

Sanhedrin => Council

The Greek word meant *council, governing body*. In the New Testament, it is used only of Jewish councils. Every town had a council, and they could pass judgment on criminal matters.

The supreme council, or Sanhedrin, met in Jerusalem. The Chief Priest presided along with seventy chief priests, scholars, and elders. The Council could condemn people to death, but the Romans had taken away the Jew's ability to carry out executions.

Gehenna => the Pit

The Hinnom Valley—Greek *Gehenna*—formed the western and southern boundaries of Jerusalem. During Old Testament times, a specific spot in the valley was used for idolatry, including child sacrifice, until King Josiah defiled it by burning the bones of the pagan priests there. By Jesus' time, it was used as the city dump, and fires were kept burning there to help eliminate the waste.

Jewish folklore claimed this spot was haunted by demons and a place where the wicked were tormented in fire. Matthew wrote primarily to Jews who lived in Judea and Galilee, and they were familiar with this spot in the Hinnom Valley and the lore surrounding it. Today, people often call it Hell, which isn't accurate. The *Pit* is closer.

The Sermon

The Setting

5 ¹When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on the hill. After he sat down, his disciples came to him, ²and he opened his mouth and began to teach them, saying,

Matthew 13:34-35 says that Jesus typically spoke to the crowds using parables, which are common stories that have a deeper meaning. He did this to force people to think about his teachings rather than judge them without trying to understand.

On this day Jesus wanted to speak directly to his followers, so he hiked up on the hills west of the Sea of Galilee and found a suitable spot. According to one tradition, it was a mile west of Capernaum, six hundred feet above the lake. The Church of the Beatitudes now sits on this site.

Having sifted the merely curious from his followers, Jesus sat down, which was the standard practice among Jewish teachers, indicating to their disciples that they were ready to teach.

Godliness Leads to Persecution

Jesus started his teaching with eight brief statements about what kind of people receive God's favor. Tradition calls them the Beatitudes, from the Latin word meaning "state of blessing." While they may seem disconnected, Jesus meant them to be a powerful introduction to his sermon.

The first seven statements are seven steps of a staircase, starting at worldly and going up to godly. The eighth statement reveals the surprising result that awaits those who climb the seven steps.

³“Favored are the beggars in the Spirit, ¹
since theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.

⁴Favored are those who grieve,
since they will be comforted.

⁵Favored are the humble,
since they will inherit the land.

⁶Favored are those who hunger and thirst for godliness,
since they will be satisfied.

⁷Favored are the merciful,
since they will receive mercy.

⁸Favored are the pure in heart,
since they will see God.

1 The traditional translation, “the poor in spirit,” is inaccurate and conceals what Jesus meant. See the Additional Information, Verse 5:3 In-depth section for details.

⁹ Favored are the peacemakers,
since they will be called, ‘sons of God.’

¹⁰ Favored are those who are persecuted because of godliness,
since theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.”

Step 1: Admit That We Are Spiritually Needy

In ancient times, there were three classes of people.

1. Aristocrats, who were sufficiently wealthy that they didn't have to work
2. Workers, who we would consider to be *very poor*
3. Beggars, people who *couldn't* work because they were disabled, elderly widows, or orphaned children

Beggars were helpless and entirely dependent on the charity of others. In a time when everyone wanted status and honor, people despised beggars.

The phrase “beggars in the Spirit” meant people who are beggars *spiritually*. Jesus implied that everyone is a spiritual beggar, trapped in the world and *helpless* to escape on their own. Fortunately, those who *admitted* this found favor with God.

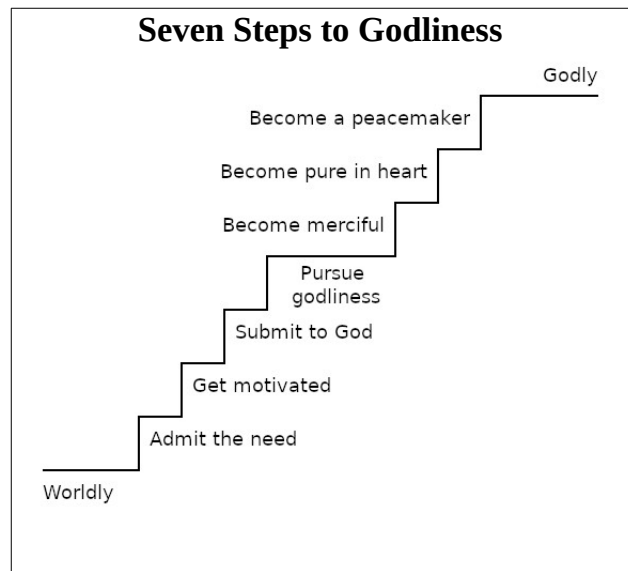
To take the first step on the staircase to godliness, we must admit that we are ungodly and are helpless to do anything about it on our own.

The Jews thought of themselves as basically good people who could afford to do better, maybe even a lot better. Jesus completely rejected that idea. They were spiritually helpless and in great need. Yet they were God's chosen people, how much more needy are we!

Jesus said that the spiritual beggars would receive the kingdom of Heaven. The Jews expected an earthly kingdom and power. He told them to stop hoping for worldly benefits and start looking forward to eternal ones.

Step 2: Get Motivated

The Jews had good reason not to take the news of their spiritual condition seriously. They were confident in the Law and the sacrifices, and they were God's chosen people. They compared themselves to others, especially foreigners, and figured, “God won't condemn everyone; I'll be okay.” Jesus said otherwise.



To take the second step, we must take our condition seriously and grieve. However, that doesn't mean wailing and becoming depressed. The initial shock needs to turn into intense motivation to seek God's help.

Step 3: Submit to God

We often think of humility as acting lowly in the eyes of others. We avoid boasting or coming across as self-important, and we show respect to the boss. This means we put up a front and conceal what we really think.

Meanwhile, we rely on ourselves. We trust our own judgment and count on our own effort. When something goes wrong, we make up a plan, fix something, and move on, or we feel guilty and discouraged. This is what the Bible means by *pride*.

Pride is a big part of why we're spiritually helpless in the first place.

The humility Jesus meant leads us to stop relying on ourselves; instead, we rely on God and submit to him. Actively practicing Jesus' teachings is part of that, but the larger part is allowing God to bring about change. As we listen to Jesus' sermon, we realize that God will continue to work on us for the rest of our lives. Submission requires patience and perseverance.

At the same time, God favors us where we are, faults and all. We may feel shocked or dismayed when we see some new flaw exposed, but God *never* feels that way. He sees everything from the time he calls us, and he is the one who exposes things to us.

Step 4: Pursue Godliness

Hunger and thirst focus us on meeting those needs, and that was Jesus' main point. But note that even if we eat and drink, we'll be hungry and thirsty again before long. The pursuit of godliness is similar. We see a weakness and work on it. Later, we see a new weakness. This is a lifelong process.

At first, we easily see our weaknesses and grow. Before long, however, God uses hardships to expose our weaknesses and, if we are willing, help us grow. The real challenge in pursuing godliness is to view hardships as opportunities for growth.

If these steps form a staircase, then this step is the landing is halfway up. The first three steps involve making decisions. We then spend a long time on the landing before godly behavior stops being a constant choice and starts coming from our hearts.

We may get tired or distracted and stop trying. We may even have to climb the earlier steps again. If we don't give up, God will even make our failures work for good.

In time, we will start up the last three steps and see the results.

Step 5: Show Mercy to Others

At first, pursuing godliness results in rapid progress as we put off worldly behavior. This produces a sense of accomplishment that should lead us to be grateful to God. Instead, we

can become overconfident and self-righteous, and our attitude toward others changes. “Why aren’t they changing? Don’t they see their sin?” This is a merciless spirit, and we must overcome it.

Then something happens that exposes us, and we feel that we are all the way back on the ground floor, and we have to climb the first three steps all over again just to get back to the landing. This is normal, and it’s an important part of our spiritual growth. Our heart doesn’t want us to see ourselves clearly, and God uses these episodes to open our eyes.

After doing this a number of times, we finally start to see ourselves clearly. We realize some things won’t change until the next life and that we are saved by grace. This changes the way we see others. We begin to show others the grace that God has shown us all along. We wait patiently while God works in their lives, even as we grieve over their mistakes. We respect their right to choose, no matter how bad their choices may be. We accept them as they are while we see what God will make them.

Step 6: Become Pure in Heart

As we genuinely show mercy to others, we become pure in heart. Jesus didn’t mean that we no longer have sin or that we’re excused from pursuing godliness. Instead, his point is this:

What God really wants is that we treat others with patience and kindness.

This is a critical theme in Jesus’ sermon. In chapter 25:31–46, Jesus will make this a matter of salvation.

Step 7: Make Peace

Just as Jesus came to make peace between God and people, the final step on the staircase to godliness is that we become his assistants. We do this by our examples, by giving, and by gently sharing God’s word, as we assist God as he works in others.

The Result: Persecution

¹¹ “You are favored when people insult and persecute you and say every wicked thing against you—as they lie—because of me. ¹² Rejoice and celebrate, because your reward in Heaven is great! For this is how they persecuted the prophets before you.”

The result of becoming godly is that the world will persecute us *because* we are godly. Jesus didn’t give a reason for the world’s reaction; he simply told us to expect it. Not only should we expect persecution, we should rejoice in it, viewing it as a sign that we are on the right track. We begin receiving the same treatment as the Old Testament prophets. ¹ God will reward us greatly in the life to come.

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth. However, if the salt becomes tasteless, how will it be made salty? It is no longer good for anything except being thrown out and trampled by people.”

1 Without going into details, the prophets experienced a great deal of rejection and hardship. Tradition says that King Manasseh of Judah had Isaiah, perhaps the greatest prophet, sawed in half.

During Jesus time, salt was used to preserve meat, fish, and other foods. Because of this, it was important and somewhat expensive, especially for people in the working class.

Jesus implied that ancient salt wasn't as pure as modern salt. One possibility is that merchants mixed pure salt with inert ingredients to increase their profits. When exposed to moisture, the salt dissolved and leached out, leaving the inert ingredients behind; the "salt" would stop being salty. When the unhappy owner discovered that this had happened, they threw the now worthless "salt" out into the street.

Persecution, along with hardships and distractions, can rob us of godliness. Jesus warned that if we let that go on too long, we will become worldly. In other words, our faith can get weak to the point where it is gone. If that happens, God will reject us.

¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city located on a hill can't be hidden. ¹⁵Neither do people light a lamp and then put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on a lampstand, and it gives light for all those in the house. ¹⁶So let your light shine before people so they may see your good works and honor your Father in Heaven.”

We may feel the temptation to conceal our godliness so that worldly people won't persecute us. Jesus rejected this approach. Just as people light a lamp to give light, we should allow the world to see our godliness and choose to honor God or not.

When the people around us are acting especially worldly, we stand out if we don't participate. We then feel pressure to go along to get along. We must ignore that pressure and choose to do what's right.

We don't need to make people notice us. People notice when we don't react to foul language or quietly slip away when a conversation becomes inappropriate. They also notice respect and small acts of kindness. Worldly people are very observant.

Jesus and the Law of Moses

¹⁷“Do not suppose that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I came not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸For amen,¹ I tell you, until the heavens and the earth pass away, surely not one letter or one mark shall pass away from the Law—until everything takes place.”

¹⁹“So, the person who sets aside one of the least of these commandments and teaches people this way will be called 'least' in the kingdom of Heaven. However, the person who practices them and teaches this will be called 'great' in the kingdom of Heaven. ²⁰For I tell you that unless your godliness abounds² far more than that of the scholars and Pharisees, you will surely not enter into the kingdom of Heaven.”

Jesus wanted to make his position on the Law clear. He practiced the Law, and he expected his followers to do the same. However, Jesus said that the religious leaders weren't practicing the Law in a way that God found acceptable. He wasn't calling for a revival of the old ways; he was calling his followers to a higher standard.

1 *Amen* is a Hebrew word that means *truly* or *so be it*.

2 That is, to be present abundantly.

The Jews viewed godliness as following a long list of rules. As Jesus continued his message, he made clear that godliness starts in a person's heart and overflows in their actions, and a person's thoughts and attitudes are as important as their outward actions.

Jesus said that the Law would remain forever, but he also slipped in a cryptic statement—"until everything comes about." At the time Jesus spoke, no one else understood that his death on a cross would be the ultimate sacrifice for sin. That one sacrifice would make all the sacrifices commanded by the Law obsolete. His resurrection from the dead would open the door for all believers to have eternal life in Heaven. And where Moses established a physical kingdom for Jews, Jesus would establish a spiritual kingdom for all people.

After Jesus' death and resurrection, his followers slowly began to realize that Jesus had spoken of a form of godliness that transcended the Law with its written regulations and that was entirely based on faith.

Today, we understand and accept this. At the time of Jesus' sermon, he was a Jew who kept the Law, speaking to other Jews who kept the Law as well.

Jesus went on to address six areas where he called his followers to do better than the Jewish religious leaders.

Murder

²¹“You heard that it was said to the ancients, ‘You_{sg} will not murder,’ and ‘the person who murders will be liable to judgment.’”

²²“But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment. So, the person who says to his brother, ‘You dummy!’ will be liable to the Council, and the person who says to his brother, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the fiery Pit.”

Then and now, people justify themselves by saying, “At least I haven't committed murder!” With a few words, Jesus took one of the easiest commands for most people to obey and made it exceedingly difficult. Note that Jesus prohibited anger and not just its overflow, name-calling.

This brings us back to verse 3, where Jesus said we are incapable on our own.

The Council likely referred to the supreme council in Jerusalem. Larger towns had councils that could punish crimes; a crime worthy of the supreme council was very serious.

This is a good place to talk about *hyperbole*. Jesus was a preacher, and he used exaggeration to shock his listeners in order to make his point. We need to see when Jesus used hyperbole and view it as a tool. Jesus still meant for us to take the underlying lesson seriously.

This is the first place where Matthew records Jesus talking about an eternal judgment. At that time, Jewish scholars had mixed views about whether there would be a resurrection, who would be resurrected, and who would be subject to judgment during the resurrection. As we read Matthew's Gospel, Jesus made clear that he believed in a universal resurrection and that

God would judge all people for all of their sins. The reference to the fiery Pit made clear that the consequences for those whom God judged would be severe.

23 “So, if you^{sg}¹ are presenting your^{sg} offering at the altar and there remember that your^{sg} brother has something against you^{sg}, 24 leave your^{sg} offering there before the altar. First go to your^{sg} brother, and then come and present your^{sg} offering.”

Under the Law, many of the offerings made at the altar cleansed a Jew from sin. As important as that was, Jesus said that seeking reconciliation with a fellow believer was more important.

The altar was located in the Temple in Jerusalem, 80-90 miles from Capernaum. Leaving one's gift at the altar to seek reconciliation would require a long journey there and back. Jesus' demand was more than an inconvenience.

25 “Be sure you^{sg} reconcile with your^{sg} accuser quickly while you^{sg} are with him on the way. Otherwise, the accuser may hand you^{sg} over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you^{sg} will be thrown into jail. 26 Amen, I tell you^{sg}, you^{sg} will surely not get out of there until you pay the last dime!”

Jesus used a more pointed illustration about the need for reconciliation. Debtor prisons were rare at this time, but Jesus used a bit of hyperbole to make a point about the severity of God's judgment.

Adultery

27 “You heard that it was said, ‘You^{sg} will not commit adultery.’”

28 “But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman to lust after her already commits adultery with in his heart.”

Then and now, adultery was more common than murder. However, many could also say, “I haven't done that, either.” Again, Jesus took a command that was relatively easy to obey and applied it to people's hearts, making obedience almost impossible.

29 “So, if your^{sg} right eye ensnares you^{sg}, tear it out and throw it away from you^{sg}. Surely you^{sg} are better off that one of your^{sg} body parts perishes rather than your^{sg} whole body be thrown into the Pit. 30 And if your^{sg} right hand ensnares you^{sg}, cut it off and throw it away from you^{sg}. Surely you^{sg} are better off if that one of your^{sg} body parts perishes rather than your^{sg} whole body go into the Pit.”

Jesus then addressed the common excuse, “Well, no one can do that!” by demanding that people either go to outrageous lengths to obey or face judgment. He repeated himself to show that he was completely serious.

Please note: Jesus didn't expect anyone to actually mutilate themselves!

Leviticus 19:28 and *Deuteronomy 14:1* prohibited self-cutting or tattooing, and gouging out one's eye or cutting off a hand certainly fell under that prohibition. In addition, common sense tells us that maiming ourselves won't change our sinful hearts, and Jesus would fully agree. Jesus was *using hyperbole* to make his point that we must take sin seriously.

1 This is the first place where Jesus used “you” singular to address a fictional person.

For example, if certain TV shows or Web sites are leading us to sin, then those *are* things we *should* cut off. If that's not enough, joining a twelve-step group is reasonable. And talking about our struggles with a trustworthy person is *always* appropriate.

Divorce

³¹ “Now, it was said, ‘The man who divorces his woman must give a divorce certificate.’”

³² “But I tell you that any man who divorces his woman, except for a charge of prostitution, causes her to commit adultery. And the man who marries a woman who has been divorced commits adultery.”

Clearly, Jesus prohibited divorce. However, the way he said it sounds strange; that's because marriage and divorce worked very differently then. For us, what Jesus said is, no divorce.

Here are the details. *Please feel free to skip this.*

Modern people will find this offensive, for good reason. Please keep in mind that what changed this was the impact of Jesus' teachings on the world!

During the times of both Moses and Jesus, a man purchased a woman from her father, and she became the man's woman. Neither Hebrew nor Greek had words for “husband” or “wife.” Thus, only a man could divorce his woman. Before the Law, men could freely divorce their women at any time.

Men expected their women to be virgins when they married, unless the woman was widowed or divorced. When the man first approached the woman, if he found she wasn't a virgin, he could charge her with prostitution. The Law commanded that such women be stoned by the community.

The Law gave women a few protections. The main one was that if a who man wanted to divorce his woman, he had to give her a written certificate of divorce. This protected a divorced woman from charges of prostitution if she remarried.

In addition, a woman could belong to only one man, but a man could have several women. The Law prohibited adultery, but that dealt with

- a married woman involved with another man
- a man involved with another man's woman

Thus, a married man could “marry” another unmarried woman.

In what he said about this, Jesus was careful not to contradict the specific commands of the Law. He kept the Law, and he expected his followers—during his time on earth—to keep the Law as well. Just like a Jewish scholar, he chose his words carefully.

Jesus said that God didn't *recognize* divorce, even if he *tolerated* it. So, even if a man wrote out a certificate and sent his woman away, God still considered them to be married. Thus, a man who “divorced” his wife made her commit adultery if she remarried, and he committed adultery if he married a “divorced” woman.

When Jesus said, “except for a complaint involving prostitution,” Jesus respected the Law where it said that a man could divorce his woman if she wasn’t a virgin when he first approached her. The Law actually required that the community stone her, but that requirement apparently wasn’t practiced by the Jews during Jesus’ time—see Joseph’s reaction to Mary’s pregnancy. Again, Jesus was respecting the Law’s requirements.

Let me be clear. Jesus *did not* authorize divorce in the case of adultery. That tradition is based on people misunderstanding the Law and how Jesus respected the Law.

Vows

³³“Again, you heard that it was said to the ancients, ‘You_{sg} will not break a vow,’ but ‘You_{sg} will carry out your_{sg} vows to the Lord.’”

³⁴“But I tell you not to make vows at all, neither by the heavens because they are God’s throne, ³⁵nor by the earth because it is the footstool of His feet, nor by Jerusalem because it is the city of the great King. ³⁶Nor shall you_{sg} make a vow by your_{sg} head because you_{sg} can’t make one hair white or black. ³⁷So, make your statement, ‘Yes, yes,’ or ‘No, no.’ But that which is more than these comes from wickedness.”

In ancient times, people lied all the time. To get around this, people made vows guaranteeing that what they said was true and they would do what they said. The Law commanded that the Israelites make their vows in God’s personal name, Yahweh.

By Jesus’ time, the Jews had decided that God’s name was too holy to say out loud. Instead, vows were made by something *especially* holy. For example, the altar was holy, but not holy enough; the blood of the sacrifices on the altar was especially holy. Thus, a vow made by the altar wasn’t binding, but a vow made by the blood on the altar was. Of course, not everyone knew all the rules, and this led to more lying and deceit.

If all this sounds legalistic and ridiculous, Jesus agreed. He simply said to stop making vows at all; instead, people should speak truthfully and do what they say.

Does that mean that we can’t take an oath or make vows of any kind? No. We can take an oath if worldly authorities require it or make vows for a solemn occasion. Jesus wants us to speak honestly and to do the things we say we will, with or without a vow.

Vengeance

³⁸“You heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye and tooth for tooth.’”

³⁹“But I tell you, do not stand up to a wicked person. Instead, when anyone slaps you_{sg} on your_{sg} right cheek, turn the other one to him also. ⁴⁰As for the person who wants to sue you_{sg} and take your_{sg} shirt, let him also have your_{sg} coat. ⁴¹And if some soldier compels you_{sg} to go one mile, go two miles with him. ⁴²Give to the person who asks, and don’t turn away from the person who wants to borrow from you_{sg}.”

When the Law commanded, “Eye for eye and tooth for tooth,” it did *not* authorize people to seek revenge. Instead, individuals were to take their complaints to the authorities, and the Law set out a standard for *authorities* to hand down penalties.

Until the last few hundred years, penalties were based on class. If a person of a low class harmed a person of a high class, the penalties were severe, while the penalties for a person of a high class were minor.

Today, we see the old practices as unjust; the penalty should fit the wrong done no matter who is involved. Today’s standard was first set out in the Law, just in very specific and drastic terms.

Even under the Law, people still wanted to get even. Much of the time, this involved petty insults and “standing up for yourself.” People were thin-skinned and quick-tempered, and those who allowed others to push them around were despised.

Jesus said to stop. Let wicked people be wicked, even if they wrong you.

If a quarrel leads someone to slap you on the right cheek, then offer to let them slap you on the left. The first slap was a backhand with the right hand. The second slap would then be with the left. His followers found this shocking, since the left hand was the “toilet hand,” and even holding it up was a serious insult.

Rather than getting angry about a lawsuit, repay more. The Law required that a cloak taken as a pledge be returned every night so the debtor could sleep in it.¹ Giving up one’s cloak for good was a steep price.

Roman law allowed a soldier to force a person to carry a burden for one mile. If a Roman soldier forced you to do this, then carry the burden for a second mile, all without complaining.

Be generous to others, even if they can’t repay.

Jesus called his followers to entrust themselves completely to God, allowing him to protect them in the midst of the world’s wickedness. This requires faith that God sees us and that he is actively pursuing our best interests.

Jesus used a bit of hyperbole to illustrate the right attitude in our hearts. He didn’t mean for us to walk into danger, show no concern for our reputations, or make no effort to avoid abuse. Most of all, he didn’t tell us to be financially irresponsible.

Love for Others

⁴³“You heard that it was said, ‘You_{sg} will love your_{sg} neighbor,’ and ‘You_{sg} will hate your_{sg} enemy.’”

⁴⁴“But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ⁴⁵so you may become sons of your Father in Heaven. For he causes his Sun to rise on the wicked and the good and causes it to rain on the godly and the ungodly.”

¹ Deuteronomy 24:12-13.

⁴⁶“So, if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Even the tax collectors do the same, right? ⁴⁷And if you only welcome your brothers, what remarkable thing are you doing? Even the Tribes do the same, right? ⁴⁸Therefore, be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

God, speaking through Moses, did command the Israelites to love their neighbors as themselves. However, Jesus’ audience knew full well that God never told them to hate their enemies and that Jesus was using irony to expose the common attitude. People were loyal to those in their communities and hostile toward outsiders.

Jesus called his followers to love *everyone*, even those who treated them with hostility. God shows kindness to all people. In the same way, godly people treat others with kindness, patience, and seeking their best interests.

Matthew used the little-used Greek word *agapé* for *love*. The common word, *philia*, meant family love and affection. The believers started using *agapé* so they could define what it meant: a deep concern for others and their welfare regardless of circumstances. This is the love that led God to send his Son to die on a cross, knowing that most people wouldn’t respond. It doesn’t demand that we feel affection for those who wrong us, but it does stop us from hating them. It also leads us to show kindness to everyone.

One practical way to love those who have wronged us is to pray that God would lead them to faith in Jesus and find forgiveness. Without that, God will remember the wrong and judge them in the end.

Seek to Please God, Not People

6 ¹“Now, be careful not to do your godly acts in front of people to be seen by them; otherwise, you have no reward from your Father in Heaven.”

The Jewish religious leaders often drew attention to themselves as they went about their observances. Jesus didn’t challenge *what* they were doing; he challenged *why* they were doing it. He called his followers to practice godliness so God would see them, not people.

Specifically, Jesus said to act in secret. He knew that when no one notices our deeds, our people-pleasing is quickly exposed, and we want to stop. When we remind ourselves that God sees and also rewards us, we keep going, purifying our motivations.

Jesus did *not* mean that we should never allow anyone else to know what we do. We can talk about giving, etc., as long as there is a good reason.

Jesus spoke about three things that the leaders did to gain attention.

Giving

²“So, when you_{sg} give charity, don’t sound a trumpet in front of you_{sg} like the gifters do in the synagogues and street so they may be honored by people. Amen, I tell you, they are receiving their reward in full. ³You_{sg}, however, when you_{sg} give charity, keep your_{sg} left hand from knowing what

your_{sg} right hand is doing, ⁴so your_{sg} charitable giving is in private. And your_{sg} Father, who sees in private, will reward you_{sg}.”

We are clever at drawing attention to ourselves, especially when our giving involves time and effort. “My heart goes out to this charity; I just wish I could do more!” “Helping feed the homeless is so rewarding!” We’re happy to hold the door as greeters. But we avoid staying after to clean up. We lose the desire to serve when others take it for granted.

Giving quietly works when we remember that God sees and keep at it.

Prayer

⁵“And when you_{sg} pray, you_{sg} will not be like the grifters, for they cherish praying as they stand in the synagogues and on the corners of the boulevards, so they might put on a show for people. Amen, I tell you, they are receiving their reward in full.”

⁶“You_{sg}, however, when you_{sg} pray, go into your_{sg} room and, after you_{sg} shut the door, pray to your_{sg} Father, who is in private. And your_{sg} Father, who sees in private, will reward you_{sg}.”

When we pray in front of others, our prayers should “sound” the same as when we pray by ourselves. One temptation is to sound extra religious. “Oh most sovereign God, thee of one hundred names...” Keep it real.

Detour

Jesus was a preacher, so he paused to talk about prayer and forgiveness.

⁷“Now, as you pray, do not chant repetitiously like the Tribes. For they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸So do not act like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

We are afraid that God won’t listen or act unless we show him that we are serious. We end up repeating ourselves, begging and pleading, or just nagging. We explain our concerns in endless detail and tell God exactly how we want him to respond. On one hand, all of this is better in God’s sight than going through the motions, and he is patient.

However, what God really wants is for us to tell him what’s on our hearts and then trust him to take care of it. As Jesus pointed out, he already knows what’s going on.

⁹“You, however, pray this way:

‘Our Father in Heaven, may your_{sg} name be treated as holy.

¹⁰May your_{sg} kingdom come; may your_{sg} will be done on earth even as it is in Heaven.

¹¹Please give us today our day’s bread,

¹²please forgive us our debts as we also forgive our debtors,

¹³and, please, do not lead us into testing but deliver us from the wicked. ¹”

Jesus provided a sample prayer to guide us. Here are some highlights.

He said to address God as “Father in Heaven.” To the Jews of his time, this bordered on blasphemy. They thought that God’s name was far too holy for people to say out loud, much

1 Or, the Wicked One, as a name for the Devil.

less to treat him so intimately. Jesus disagreed. The apostles later taught that God is our adopted Father; we should address him that way. We only need to say, “Father,” once, not at the start of every sentence. We should ask:

- that people respect and obey God
- for God give us what we need that day
- for forgiveness and to forgive those who have wronged us
- for protection from hardships and the wicked

¹⁴“For if you forgive people their offenses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵If, however, you don’t forgive people, neither will your Father forgive your offenses.”

Since Jesus mentioned asking God for forgiveness, he brought up the importance of our forgiving others. If we refuse to forgive others, God will also refuse to forgive us.

Fasting

¹⁶“Now, when you fast, stop being miserable like the grifters, for they deform their faces ¹ so they might put on a show for people as they fast. Amen, I tell you, they are receiving their reward in full.”

¹⁷“You_{sg}, however, when you_{sg} fast, rub oil on your_{sg} head² and wash your_{sg} face. ¹⁸so, as you_{sg} fast, you_{sg} do not reveal yourself_{sg} to people but to your_{sg} Father, who is in private. And your_{sg} Father, who sees in private, will reward you_{sg}.”

The Law of Moses commanded the Israelites to fast on only one day each year, the Day of Atonement. However, in the Old Testament, people fasted when they were in distress or mourning, often as part of an appeal for God’s help.

The Pharisees, the grass roots religious leaders of Jesus’ time, routinely fasted on Mondays and Thursdays to demonstrate their devotion; Jesus accused some of them of doing it for show.

Jesus didn’t tell his followers to fast, but if they did, he told them to do it privately.

Summary

Here are some key lessons from this section:

What we do is important to God, but *why* we do it is *more* important. Godliness starts in the heart and comes out in our actions.

If we do certain things only when people are watching, we are people-pleasing. Some of the religious leaders of Jesus’ day fell into that trap, and it corrupted them.

God *sees* us, both our actions and our hearts, even when no one else does.

God *rewards* us when we seek to please him. Later in *Matthew*, Jesus will say that God rewards even our smallest acts when we do them by faith.

1 Jesus probably meant that they put on a “pity me!” face.

2 In ancient times, people did this for daily hygiene and cosmetic reasons.

Choose Godliness

Everyone makes choices about how they live, even if they don't think about them. These choices affect our attitudes, feelings, and actions. Jesus called his followers to make choices about what they value, how they view things, and their priorities.

In What We Value

¹⁹"Don't stockpile treasures for yourselves on earth where a moth and its eating destroy and thieves break in and steal. ²⁰But stockpile treasures for yourselves in Heaven where a moth and its eating don't destroy and thieves don't break in or steal. ²¹For where your_{sg} treasure is, there your_{sg} heart will also be."

Material things wear out, and we won't take them with us when we die. If we invest our time, effort, and money in them, we will have nothing in the end. However, God stores up the time, effort, and money we invest in serving him for eternity. More importantly, if we invest in material things, our hearts are with the world. If we invest in godly things, our hearts are with God.

Jesus calls us to invest our time, effort, and money wisely.

In How We View Things

²²"The eye is the lamp controlling the body. So, if your_{sg} eye is sincere, your_{sg} whole body will be radiant. ²³But, if your_{sg} eye is wicked, your_{sg} whole body will be dark. So if the light within you_{sg} is darkness, how great is that darkness!"

Jesus' metaphor sounds complicated today. In modern terms, the eye is a window, and the body is a room. The window lets sunlight into the room. If the window is clear, the room is filled with light. If the window is dirty, the room is dingy. Jesus was talking about how we look at the people and things around us. If we see things as God does, then our attitudes, feelings, and actions will be godly. If we look at things in a worldly way, our thinking will be worldly.

For example, when a coworker is successful, we can choose to look at them with respect or jealousy. We can choose to look at a fancy car as unnecessary or with longing. These choices affect how we think, feel, and behave.

Jesus calls us to choose to look at things as God does.

In Our Priorities

²⁴"No one can to serve two lords, for he will either hate the one and love the other, or he will cling to one and despise the other. You can't serve God and Wealth. ¹¹"

We can have multiple priorities: God, family, job, and so on. However, conflicts will come up, and we have to choose what is most important. When we put God first, everything else tends to fall into place because God wants us to have balanced lives.

1 Literally, Mammon, the Syrian god of Wealth.

When God becomes "a" priority, not "the" priority, something else becomes "the" priority and pushes God aside. In time, that becomes the lord of our lives, and God loses his place in our hearts.

Jesus mentioned wealth, which is "the" priority for many. The word he used referred to a pagan god of wealth. Another "lord" is people-pleasing, and there are many possible "gods" for us to pursue. Either God is front and center in our daily lives, or something else is pushing God out.

Jesus calls us to make God our top priority in our daily lives.

Don't Worry

²⁵"For this reason, I tell you, don't worry about your life—what can you eat or what can you drink, or about your body—what can you wear. Life is more than food and the body more than clothing, right?"

The average Jew made about four dollars per day—today, one third of people in the world make that or less. Thus, they had good reason to worry about food and clothing. Jesus said don't. Our physical needs are *not* the most important things in life.

²⁶Observe the birds of the sky, they don't sow or reap or gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. You are worth much more than they, right?"

Furthermore, God will provide for us if we trust him.

²⁷"And who among you, by worrying, can add eighteen inches¹ to his lifespan?²"

Jesus made a wordplay. The plain meaning is that no amount of worry will add 18 inches to a person's height. Jesus' audience understood he meant that worry won't add 18 minutes, much less 18 years, to anyone's lifespan. If anything, worry *shortens* our lives.

²⁸"And why do you worry about clothing? Consider how the lilies of the field grow. They don't labor or spin,²⁹ but I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor dressed himself like one of these.

³⁰So, if God attires the grass of the field in this way, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into an oven,³ he will much more clothe you, right, little-faiths?⁴"

Solomon inherited the kingdom of Israel from his father David, and God made him *enormously* wealthy; yet, God "dressed" wildflowers more gloriously than Solomon. Again, God will provide for us *if* we trust him.

To drive home his point, Jesus added on a nickname he occasionally used for his followers, "little-faiths." Faith leaves no room for worry, and worry indicates a lack of faith.

³¹"Therefore, do not worry, you who say, 'What can we eat?' or 'What can we drink?' or 'What can we wear?' ³²You see, the Tribes strive after all these things. Surely, your heavenly Father knows

1 Literally, a cubit, around eighteen inches.

2 The word meaning *lifespan* could also mean *height*.

3 That is, used as fuel in an oven for baking bread.

4 This is a nickname that Jesus sometimes used for his followers.

that you need them all! ³³ So, seek first God's kingdom and his godliness, and all these things will be provided for you."

Again, Jesus said not to worry. Instead, we should seek God's kingdom and *his* godliness—not some "righteousness" made up by people. If we do, God will provide everything we need.

³⁴ "So, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. This day's evil is enough for it."

One day at a time. If we need to plan for the future, we should make our plans, commit them to God, then focus on today.

Various Teachings on Godliness

In the remainder of the sermon, Jesus made a number of quick points about various topics.

Don't Judge Others

⁷ ¹ "Stop judging, so that you will not be judged! ² For with that judgment you judge, you will be judged, and with that measure you measure, it will be measured against you."

To understand what Jesus meant, here are some things he was *not* talking about.

- Serving on a jury
- Evaluating people when we are in positions of authority
- Learning about people before trusting them
- Seeing people as they are, with their strengths and weaknesses
- Using good judgment generally

He meant what we do to others without realizing it but hate when others do it to us: looking down on people, criticizing them, even condemning them. This applies even to the wicked. We may be appalled at their behavior, but Jesus forbids us to judge them.

Jesus backed up his words with a threat. If we refuse to stop judging others, then God will judge us.

Faith and ungodliness, including a judgmental spirit, are mutually exclusive. Jesus wasn't talking about salvation by works; he meant that, as we pursue godliness, we won't tolerate sin in ourselves. If we continue to sin, that shows a lack of faith.

Heal Yourself Before Healing Others

³ "Now, why do you_{sg} look at the splinter that is in your_{sg} brother's eye, yet you_{sg} don't notice the beam in your_{sg} own eye? ⁴ Or, how will you_{sg} say to your_{sg} brother, 'Allow me to remove that splinter from your_{sg} eye,' and, behold! that beam is in your_{sg} eye? ⁵ You_{sg} grifter! First remove the beam from your_{sg} own eye, and then you_{sg} will see clearly to remove the splinter from your_{sg} brother's eye."

Jesus expected his followers to help each other grow. However, he called them to look at themselves *before* looking at others.

Share Your Faith with Restraint

⁶“Do not give sacred things to dogs or throw your pearls before pigs; otherwise, they will trample them with their feet and then turn and tear you apart.”

Jesus warned his followers about sharing their faith with unbelievers. We should expect persecution, but not invite it by oversharing.

Trust God to Answer

⁷“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸For everyone who asks, receives, the person who seeks, finds, and for the one who knocks, it will be opened.”

⁹“Now, what person is there among you—when his son asks him for bread, he won’t give him a stone, right? ¹⁰Or, when he will ask for a fish, he won’t give him a snake, right? ¹¹If, therefore, you, who are wicked, know to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in Heaven give good things to those who ask him?”

Jesus encouraged his followers to trust God to meet their needs and to ask for help. He noted that worldly parents meet the needs of their children, and God is far more attentive and kind.

Good parents give their children what they *need*, not what they *want*. God *always* gives us what we need, but we must also remember that he sees us in the big picture, and what we want isn’t always what is good for us.

We each have our own view of God, and much of it is based on our parents. To the extent that our parents were godly, we have a positive view of God, but to the extent that they weren’t, our view of God can be very negative. We need to shape our view of God to reflect who he really is, and that can require a lot of effort.

Treat Others the Way You Want to be Treated

¹²“Now, everything, as much as you might ever want that people would do for you, you also do this for them. ¹ For this is the Law and the Prophets.”

Jewish scholars loved to debate over words, and Jesus apparently saw the same tendencies in his followers. Therefore, he worded a simple principle so that there were no loopholes, no exceptions, and no excuses.

This teaching is foundational. Godliness leads us to treat others, especially the ungodly, with kindness at all times. Treating others how we want to be treated is called the Golden Rule.

Other cultures had a negative version of this rule: “Don’t treat others in a way you don’t want to be treated.” Jesus’ expectation was vastly higher.

¹ Jesus deliberately used a lot of extra words to make his point about “everything.”

Enter Through the Narrow Gate

¹³“Enter by the narrow gate! For the gate is wide and the road is spacious that lead to destruction, and many are those who enter by them. ¹⁴For the gate is narrow and the road is confined that lead to life, and few are those who find it.”

The Jews believed that God had chosen their entire nation; as members of the nation, they were safe. Therefore, they tended to think that Jesus' teachings were true but optional. He was calling a few Jews to be super-committed.

Jesus bluntly warned his followers against this. He strongly implied that God would soon reject the nation, and the majority of Jews were going down the wrong path. Even among the Jews, God would accept only those who devoted themselves to godliness, and only a few would find the way.

We also tend to compare ourselves to others and assume that God will condemn only those who clearly fall short. This sounds reasonable, but Jesus clearly warned against it.

We should compare ourselves to Jesus' teachings and persevere in practicing them, even if only a few seem to be making the same effort.

Know Teachers by Their Actions

¹⁵“Beware of false prophets! They come to you in sheepskin garments, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶You will recognize them by their fruit.”

“People don't gather grapes from thorns or figs from thistles, right? ¹⁷So, every good tree produces good fruit, but a rotten tree produces wicked fruit. ¹⁸A good tree can't produce wicked fruit, nor can a rotten tree produce good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that doesn't produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

²⁰“Consequently, you will recognize them by their fruit.”

Jesus lived during times of Roman oppression and hardship. A few Jews, the Zealots, turned to violence, and rebel leaders popped up. To gather followers, they claimed they were the Christ. Jesus warned his followers against them. Angry zeal, persuasive speeches, and empty promises did not make a godly leader.

We also need to be careful about who we follow. Some leaders are skilled at hiding their true selves, but the lives of those following give them away. Over time, a godly leader will produce a godly congregation.

In Conclusion, Practice What Jesus Taught

Jesus wrapped up his sermon with warnings to practice what he had taught.

Saying, “Lord, Lord!” Isn't Enough

²¹“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord Lord!’ will enter into the kingdom of Heaven; rather, it is the person who does the will of my Father in Heaven. ²²On that day, many will say to me, ‘Lord! Lord! We prophesied in your name, expelled demons in your name, and performed many miracles in

your name, right?’²³ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never acknowledged you! Get away from me, you who practice lawlessness!’”

Jesus sternly warned that he wanted people to practice his teachings; calling him “Lord” wasn’t enough. Even those who performed miracles in his name would find themselves rejected if they didn’t do what he said.

Wisdom and Folly

²⁴“Everyone, therefore, who hears these words of mine and practices them will be like a wise man who built his house on bedrock. ²⁵And the rain came down, the streams came, and the wind blew and beat upon that house, and yet it didn’t fall, for its foundation had been laid on bedrock.”

²⁶“And everyone who hears these words of mine and doesn’t practice them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷And the rain came down, the streams came, and the wind blew and beat upon that house, and so it fell! And its fall was great.”

Two people built houses. The first one dug down to bedrock and laid a foundation that was secure. After a great deal of work, the house was finished. The second one laid a foundation on the smooth, even bed of a dried-up stream. The house was finished quickly. Both people lived in their houses for a long time.

The neighbors looked down on the first person for wasting a lot of effort on a foundation that couldn’t be seen. They praised the second person for getting the job done quickly and easily.

However, a powerful storm struck both houses, and the streams flooded. The first person remained safe in their house, while the second person was swept away as their house collapsed.

The “storm” Jesus talked about was judgment. On that day, nothing that we have accomplished or acquired will matter except our faith and the treasure we have stored up in Heaven. That will be a day of salvation for the wise and destruction for the foolish.

Closing

²⁸“And as a result, when Jesus finished these words, the crowds were astounded at his teaching.
²⁹For he was teaching them like one who has authority and not like their scholars.”

Those who listened to Jesus’ message were left overwhelmed with amazement at what he taught. The teachings of the Jewish scholars often seemed impractical and boring, but Jesus taught hard truths with authority. As Matthew continued to describe Jesus’ ministry, it became clear that many who heard went away uncertain about what to think and ended up not responding.

We can react the same way. Jesus seemed to imply that we are saved based on our actions and not by faith. Jesus set his expectations so high that no one, other than Jesus himself, can meet them. If we sometimes judge people or call bad drivers idiots, are we lost? How does this fit in with what Paul wrote later on?

First, the Apostles, including Paul, knew, practiced, and taught Jesus’ teachings. Any doctrine or teaching that what Jesus said doesn’t agree with Paul’s teaching that we are saved by grace through faith is false.

Let’s go back to the first thing Jesus said: “Favored are the beggars in the Spirit...” He knew that no one could practice his teachings without falling short, and he said so. We must remember that, at the time he preached this sermon, only he understood what “grace” meant. In part, he *intended* his teachings to show us that we can only be saved by grace. Perhaps he was looking forward to Paul’s words in the letter to the church in Ephesus:

⁸For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift— ⁹not from works, so that no one can boast. (*Ephesians 2:8-9, CSB*)

We are saved from God’s just judgment against our sins because Jesus bore our punishment. That leaves us free to live by faith and for God to work in us. But faith also leads us to pursue godliness; God’s grace gives us room to fall short even as we grow.

How much faith is enough? Only God and Jesus know. But look at this conversation.

³“Be on your guard. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. ⁴And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and comes back to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.”

⁵The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith.”

⁶“If you have faith the size of a mustard seed,” the Lord said, “you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.” (*Luke 17:3-6, CSB*)

The Apostles were overwhelmed by one of Jesus’ teachings. Maybe “Increase our faith.” should have an exclamation point! Jesus didn’t want them to become discouraged, so he told them that the tiniest amount of faith can do what is humanly impossible.

Coming back to Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, he knew that no one would practice them perfectly, but he also knew that God would give us grace to work on it. Our goal

should be to “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” while humbly accepting that we fall short. Paul said,

12 Not that I have already reached the goal or am already perfect, but I make every effort to take hold of it because I also have been taken hold of by Christ Jesus. 13 Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and reaching forward to what is ahead, 14 I pursue as my goal the prize promised by God’s heavenly call in Christ Jesus. (*Philippians* 3:12-14, CSB)

Additional Information

Verse 5:3 In-Depth

In my opinion, the translation of the first half of this verse is lacking, which makes understanding what Jesus meant difficult. Before I say anything else, this is going to get technical. Please feel free to stop reading here.

Here is the Greek text with glosses. I'll start with the glosses and then explain how the grammar connects them.

1	2	3	4	5
Μακάριοι	οἱ	πτωχοὶ	τῷ	πνεύματι
favored	the	beggars	the	spirit
Adj-Nom	Art-Nom	Adj-Nom	Art-Dat	Noun-Dat

Word 1—μακάριος

Traditionally, translations use blessed for this word. That's valid, but like many "religious" words, its meaning isn't clear. Favored or privileged is better, indicating preferential treatment from God.

Word 3—πτωχός

Traditionally, this is translated as *poor*. However, *poor* means something different to us than it meant to Jesus and his audience.

By our standards, at least 80% of all people were poor, even destitute. They earned just enough money each day to survive. At the same time, they got by. These people were the working class.

In classical Greece, πτωχός meant "cowering," and people applied it to beggars. We can imagine people who were disabled, too old to work, or orphans begging from the wealthy. They hoped for some change, but they might receive a kick instead. By Jesus' time, it referred to people *who couldn't support themselves*; that's what it meant to be "poor" then.

The Grammar

This is an example of how Greek is more nuanced than English, that is, the grammar adds meaning to this clause. Here's a breakdown.

- Word 3 is an adjective, but word 2, the article, causes it to act as a noun
- Word 1 is an adjective "in the first predicate position," which means "the beggars *are* favored," rather than "the favored beggars"
- Words 4 and 5 go together, the article indicates a specific spirit
 - Both "the spirit" and "the Spirit" are possible
 - In the New Testament, the article plus "spirit" most often refers to the Holy Spirit

- Ignoring the article—“the”—only makes sense if, in English, “the spirit” is equivalent to “spirit”
 - In verse 8, “pure in the heart” is equivalent to “pure in heart,” and leaving out “the” sounds better
 - Whether “poor in the spirit” and “poor in spirit” are equivalent is debatable
- Words 4 and 5 are both in the dative case
 - This can indicate a number of things, depending on the context
 - Here, this could be a “dative of sphere,” which has to do with a physical or abstract location
 - “beggars *in* the Spirit”
 - People who are spiritual beggars
 - This could also be a “dative of reference,” which limits a statement that would otherwise not be true
 - “beggars when it comes to the Spirit”
 - People can be affluent in the world but beggars in the Spirit
 - Both options end up close in meaning; I prefer the second because it drives the point home

Summary

Clearly, translating this verse is deceptively complicated, and we can easily come to several reasonable approaches. On one extreme,

Blessed are the poor in spirit

implies people who are *lacking courage* or some similar trait. This requires ignoring “the” in “the spirit.”

On the other,

Favored are those who are beggars when it comes to the Spirit

implies people who *spiritually in need*. I clearly favor this approach.

Where Did “poor in spirit” Come From?

As I looked into the reasons for the traditional approach, I discovered that the Latin Vulgate, the Bible of the Catholic Church, started the “no *the*” trend that continued in English translations made from the Greek. I suspect that English translators didn’t want change the plain meaning of the Latin.

Latin lacks the article, that is, there is no “the.” Thus, the Latin looks like “blessed poor *in* spirit”; both “the” are missing.

In addition, the Greek word that means either *beggar* or *poor* in the Latin translation is the word from which we get *pauper*. As I said above, over 80% of people in Jesus’ audience were paupers.

Finally, the Latin word *spiritus*, while it had the same meaning as the Greek word, also meant things like courage and arrogance.

These things seemed to have built a strong tradition around “poor in spirit.”