

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Article series by John Ogwyn that appeared in the World Ahead magazine (1998-1999)

PART 1

How important is happiness? It's a quest that millions pursue. Nevertheless, very few ever truly achieve it. Why is that? The Western world is awash in material goods. In a number of ways, the average person in our society lives in greater comfort than the richest rulers of previous centuries. For all of this prosperity, however, it seems that countless numbers of people are frustrated and feel empty inside. Why should this be? Could it be that there is far more to happiness than prosperity and physical comfort?

The quest for happiness has proven to be not only elusive, but also expensive. Billions of dollars are spent each year in gambling. From state-run lotteries to riverboat casinos, money comes pouring in from people in pursuit of happiness. The very existence of a mega-billion-dollar entertainment industry is further evidence of the seemingly endless pursuit of pleasure.

Along with happiness, people are increasingly seeking inner peace in this age of anxiety and turbulence. The self-help movement has become another billion-dollar industry in modern America. And if you won't help yourself, there are always drugs. Both legal and illegal, they promise to make all our problems go away.

But despite all our searching, the suicide rate is near an all-time high. It is the second leading cause of death among our young people. So once again, why, in the midst of so much abundance, is there such frustration and emptiness?

Could it be that there is a spiritual component to happiness that's been overlooked? The Creator of mankind sent along an instruction book with His "product." That instruction book is the Holy Bible, which contains the missing dimension in human knowledge - the spiritual dimension.

It's true that, throughout history people have tried to fill the spiritual void that lies at the core of their feelings of frustration and emptiness. Their approaches have fallen into one of two categories- emotion-cantered religion or rulecentered religion.

Those whose religion has been emotion-centered have placed an emphasis on producing ecstatic feelings, often with the aid of music. In various cultures

throughout the centuries, mystics and charismatics have sought to attain an emotional high through the medium of religion.

Others have emphasized the meticulous following of rules and rituals. The Pharisees of Christ's day, for instance, had deduced 613 laws from the first five books of the Old Testament and had amplified each of them with numerous oral traditions. Their scrupulous observance of rigid and minute regulations produced in them a feeling of superiority to the common people.

A Religious Revolution

The true religious teachings of Jesus Christ of Nazareth were and are nothing less than revolutionary! True Christianity certainly evokes emotion - love, joy and concern for others. And true Christianity is structured upon rules - the law of God, as magnified by Christ Himself. And yet the ultimate end of Christianity is neither emotions nor rules. It's something far greater.

The very goal of following God's revealed way of life and living by His rules is to effect an inner transformation of the mind and character. In His famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus Christ laid out the very essence of Christianity. At the beginning of this discourse, He explained seven distinct traits of character that produce ultimate happiness - happiness that persists even in the midst of persecution, outward pressure and turmoil.

With this article, The World Ahead begins a three-part series to examine in-depth what is undoubtedly the most important section of the entire Bible. For in the Sermon on the Mount, our Savior Jesus Christ teaches us not only what God's display of life is, but also how to internalize it! Nowhere can we better learn just how to become true sons and daughters of Almighty God.

First off, let's look at the meaning of happiness. The Sermon on the Mount is recorded in chapters 5-7 of the book of Matthew. It begins with what are generally called the Beatitudes, nine verses that start with the word "blessed" in most English translations. "Blessed is a transformation of the Greek makarios, a word some other Bible versions render as "happy". The Interpreter's Bible states in its commentary on this section, "The Greek word rendered blessed is used in pagan literature to denote the highest state of happiness and well-being..." It is the equivalent of the Hebrew word 'ashre, which means "how happy." Indeed, the very word "beatitude" comes from a derivation of the Latin word beatus, also meaning "happy."

True happiness isn't something generated from the outside. The kind of happiness that Christ describes in the Sermon on the Mount isn't dependent on external events or situations. In fact, Jesus teaches us that real happiness

endures even in the face of persecution and martyrdom (5:10-12). The entire message of Jesus Christ centered on the coming Kingdom of God (4:17). At the beginning of His ministry, in the Sermon on the Mount, He explained what is expected of those who will inherit this Kingdom.

Near the very end of His ministry, recorded in Matthew 23, Christ explained to those who assumed they were the Kingdom's heirs - the Pharisees among them - why they were not (Matt. 21:43-45). Rather than deep inner happiness and contentment, they were destined to receive grief, sorrow and woe. Why? Because their attitudes demonstrated a hollow, superficial approach to religion. Christ called them hypocrites and "blind guides" (Matt. 23:23-24).

Most would assume that a sense of personal adequacy and self-worth is a necessary for happiness. Jesus Christ, however, revealed that the very opposite is true. He began His sermon with these words: "Blessed [how happy] are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (5:3). Who are the "poor in spirit" and what do they have that leads to happiness?

The Greek term here translated as "poor" literally means "beggar." The poor in spirit, then, are those who harbor no illusions of their own spiritual self-sufficiency. They are deeply aware of how inadequate their own humanly generated spirituality and righteousness really are. Perhaps the place in Scripture that best illustrates this point is the parable of Christ recorded in Luke 18:9-14. We are told in verse 9 that "He spoke this parable to some who trusted themselves that they were righteous, and despised others." The story that Jesus Christ recounted was of two men who went up to the temple to pray, the one Pharisee and the other a publican - that is, a tax collector.

The Pharisees prided themselves on their meticulous observance of the entire law according to an elaborate, but quite unnecessary, oral tradition that they had developed on their own. The publicans, on the other hand, were despised as employees of the hated Roman government - and, indeed, many of them were actual thieves.

The Pharisee made an elaborate prayer in which he thanked God for his supposed superiority to other men. He recounted to God a list of his religious accomplishments to buttress this claim. But the publican, we're told, wouldn't so much as raise his eyes to heaven. Instead he confessed his own unworthiness and asked God for mercy. And it was the publican, according Kingdom. They are on their way to to Jesus Christ, who went away justified (v. 14) - that is, restored to a right relationship with God.

The starting point for true happiness and inner peace is to realize that none of us can meet our own spiritual needs. We can't generate real spiritual power within

ourselves. What we can do, however, is to be profoundly aware of our need for a Savior and to beseech the Creator of the Universe for His help and mercy. As the Apostle James explained, "God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6). Those who truly confess their inherent spiritual bankruptcy and look to God to supply that need will be the real heirs of the Kingdom. They are on their way to happiness and contentment that will last forever.

Next, Jesus said something in His sermon that on the surface appears to be self-contradictory: "Blessed [how happy] are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matt. 5:4). Mourning or grief would appear to be the very antithesis of happiness. Why, then, would Christ list this as one of the seven aspects of character that would lead to inner happiness and contentment?

The prophet Ezekiel recorded a vision in which he saw a group of people set apart by God to be spared the prophetic judgments that were to come upon Israel. They are described as those who "sigh and cry" for the abominations of their people (Ezek. 9:4). In other words, they are deeply moved and troubled by the sin they see around them and the painful consequences it produces. And hating the sin themselves, they are able to genuinely repent. The grief they experience in struggling to overcome sin and in observing the corruption of the outside world, however, is only temporary. Like a righteous man of Christ's day named Simeon, they are awaiting the "consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25).

Christ's promise to such people is one of comfort. Those who have come to truly hate sin and who are deeply grieved by it are the heirs of a Kingdom that will be built upon righteousness. They can look forward to the time when the pain and sorrow that constitute sin's legacy will be forever banished. They will be the heirs of an age in which God Himself will provide comfort (Rev. 21:4).

The third character trait Christ emphasized in the Sermon on the Mount is listed in Matthew 5:5: "Blessed [how happy] are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." The prophet Daniel recorded that in the end time, the God of heaven will abolish the governments of this world and set up a kingdom that shall never be removed (Dan.2:44). The true saints of God are destined to literally rule as kings and priests with Jesus Christ on this very earth (Rev. 5:10).

While promising His apostles the future responsibility of sitting on thrones and ruling the various tribes of Israel (Luke 22:29-30), Christ emphasized that they must be prepared to administer a Government vastly different from any they had ever known. Christ taught them that as rulers they were to exemplify an attitude of humble service rather than one of domineering vanity. Meekness, the very opposite of haughtiness and self-will, is a character trait of inestimable value to God.

Now meekness is in no way to be equated with weakness. Jesus Christ set us the perfect example, "who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously" (1 Peter 2:23). Those who are truly meek let God fight their battles for them. They are not involved in the strife and contention that derive from rampant self-will.

They will be the heirs of the Kingdom that is to come. "Blessed [how happy] are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be filled" (Matt. 5:6). This is the fourth vital characteristic that Jesus taught His disciples to build. What is it that we most deeply desire and yearn for? The Apostle Peter paints one of the most vivid word pictures in the Bible in 1 Peter 2:2. He declares that Christians are to desire God's Truth with the same eagerness and anticipation that a newborn baby desires its mother's milk. Anyone who has ever seen a nursing infant has an idea of what fervent desire is really all about!

Psalms 42 begins the second section of the book of Psalms, a section the Jews traditionally associated with the festival season of Pentecost. It opens with a description of the deep, insatiable thirst that the psalmist had for God and His ways. "Righteousness" is obeying God's commandments (119:172). And the thirst for it can only be quenched by God's Holy Spirit, the rivers of living water that Christ offered (John 4:14).

Physical appetites can never be permanently satisfied. But Christ holds out to those who hunger and thirst after the ways of God the promise of being truly filled. Those who have faithfully endured the trials and pressures that are prerequisite to entering God's Kingdom (Acts 14:22) will never again experience that inner longing that gnaws away like hunger and thirst (Rev. 7:16-17). They will have access to the waters of life and to the fruit of the tree of life (Rev. 22:1-2). And they will be like God (1 John 3:2), perfect in character.

"Blessed [how happy] are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy" (Matt. 5:7) This fifth quality emphasized by Christ is yet another characteristic that goes against the grain of human nature. We naturally respond in retaliation and vengeance. How hard it is to untangle ourselves from hurts and grievances! "It's not fair!" we say.

In Matthew 18:21-35 we find a parable that Jesus told to illustrate the matter of forgiveness. Simon Peter had come to Christ and asked Him if he should be willing to forgive his brother as many as seven times! Imagine his surprise when Christ told him that the number of times he must forgive his brother was "not seven, but seventy times seven." Peter's first thought may have been, "But I couldn't keep track of that many times!" And that, of course, is the whole point.

We are not to be "keeping score." Rather, we must be ready to extend mercy and compassion continually. After all, we need God to extend it to us continually.

Those individuals in whose heart bitterness and resentment are never allowed to take root are on their way to true happiness and contentment. They are easily moved with compassion and quickly extend mercy and forgiveness to others. God promises that they need not fear, for they in turn will receive mercy from the Creator.

A sixth vital character trait emphasized by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount is purity of heart and motive. "Blessed [how happy] are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (5:8). This attribute is the very opposite of hypocrisy. The word "hypocrite" comes from a Greek word meaning an actor on the stage. In the Greek dramas of the first century, actors wore masks while they recited their lines. Christ likened some of the religious leaders of His day to those actors. For many of the Pharisees were simply playing a part. They "wore a mask" that appeared to be very religious and holy. They followed countless rules and rituals. But behind this disguise, their inner lives weren't permeated with genuineness and purity of motive.

James says that "pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world" (James 1:27). Religion that is purely motivated reflects itself in helping those who are unable to help you in return. A desire to reflect the mind and attitude of Jesus Christ, rather than to impress other people is what God is after in each of us. Those who are pure in heart will ultimately see God. Revelation 22:4 anticipates a time when the saved "shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads."

The seventh distinct aspect of character to which Christ points is that of being a peacemaker. "Blessed [how happy] are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Matt. 5:9). Peacemakers aren't out spreading gossip and rumors, stirring up strife between individuals and among groups. Rather, a peacemaker pours oil on troubled waters and has a calming effect on those around him.

People the world over express a desire for peace, yet there is very little peace to be found. And there's a reason for that! Humanity simply doesn't know the way to peace (Rom. 3:17). Peace is the result of something, but most people have no idea of what. The key is found in Isaiah 32:17: "The work of righteousness will be peace, and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance forever." Peacemakers are practicing righteousness as a way of life. When that way fills the earth, peace will result. The peacemakers have God's nature and attitude, and they are destined to be called His children forever.

In Matthew 5:10-11, Christ explained that those who exemplify the seven traits of character we've just examined will possess happiness and inner peace, even when they're persecuted and reviled by a world that hates the ways of God. Indeed. This very persecution is a sign to them that they are living a godly life and walking in the footsteps of past martyrs – including Christ Himself. And they can endure it all joyfully, for they have a hope and a confidence that stretches beyond the here and now.

The purpose of real religion – true Christianity – is neither to well up with emotion, nor to mechanically follow a set of rules and regulations. Rather, it is to take on the very nature of Almighty God, the very mind of our Savior Jesus Christ (cf. Phil. 2:5-8). To be sure, the only way to achieve this end is to yield ourselves to God and obey His law. And just as sure, if we are following God's way of life, we will experience and even display powerful positive emotions. Nevertheless, the purpose and end of Christianity goes far beyond emotionalism or rulekeeping. It involves an inward transformation – becoming the very sons and daughters of the Living God.

Real happiness and peace of mind aren't derived from any material things of the world around. As Christ set the tone for His teachings about the Kingdom, He began by describing the character of those who were to be the heirs of that Kingdom. And it is from this character the inner values of the heart and mind, that eternal happiness springs.

In our next issue, we will examine “letting our light shine” and the main theme of the Sermon on the Mount – how Jesus Christ magnified the law of God.

PART 2

Did Jesus Christ teach that obedience to God's law is necessary for salvation? Most professing Christians would emphatically answer "NO"! But are they right? What did Jesus Himself say? Do the commandments of the Old Testament remain valid for New Testament Christians?

The New Testament application of God's Law and the true Christian's response to it will be in the spotlight in this the second installment of our three-part series on the Sermon on the Mount. In our last issue, we discussed the beatitudes - statements by Christ revealing the way to true happiness and lasting fulfillment. We now continue our examination of this Sermon - found in Matthew 5 to 7 - which is undoubtedly the most important section of the entire Bible!

The Hebrew Scriptures, commonly called the Old Testament, point beyond themselves to a further and fuller revelation from Almighty God. Moses, the

author of the first five books of the Bible - called the Torah - testified in Deuteronomy 18:15 that the Eternal God would, at some future time, raise up in Israel "a prophet like unto me." In the closing words of this book, appended to the account of Moses' death and burial in chapter 34, is the statement, "And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses" (v. 10 KJV). This statement is traditionally understood to have been added by Ezra the Priest, who put the canon of the Old Testament into its final form. Clearly, there was to arise a prophet comparable to Moses, but, at the close of the Old Testament period, that prophet had not yet come.

What was unique about Moses? For one thing, God dealt with Moses "face to face" (v. 10). Moreover, Moses was the mediator of the covenant between God and Israel (Ex. 19-20). We also must consider that Moses had the rank of lawgiver (John 7:19). While subsequent prophets might have expounded upon the law that God had given through Moses, none pretended to speak with the same authority or to give additional law. After the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, in the time of King Artaxerxes, the Jews recognized that the canon of Hebrew Scripture was closed. The first-century Jewish priest and historian, Flavius Josephus, bears witness to this in his book *Against Apion* (chap. 1, sec. 8).

Just as the last statements of the Torah bear witness to a special prophet yet to come, so also does the prophetic book of Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament. It speaks of a preliminary messenger preparing the way before the "messenger of the covenant." This Messenger of the Covenant was to suddenly come to His temple and was prophesied to cleanse and to purge (v. 3).

Role of Jesus Christ

When Christ came, just over four centuries after the days of Malachi, He was not simply another teacher of the law. Rather, He came as the Mediator of the New Covenant (Heb. 8:6). He was, moreover, the Messenger of the Covenant prophesied by Malachi. And Christ tells us that He alone had directly seen the Father (John 6:46) and had been sent by Him with a message. "I have come in My Father's name," Jesus declared (5:43). He went on to tell His listeners, "For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me" (v. 46).

Additionally, Jesus Christ came as a Lawgiver. He made clear in the Sermon on the Mount that His words superseded anything His listeners had ever heard before. But did Jesus, as Lawgiver, somehow "do away" with the law that had been given through Moses many centuries earlier? This is a crucial question that has been greatly misunderstood by most professing Christians.

As we have already noted, Jesus Christ brought a message from the Father (Acts 10:36). That message is described as the Good News of the Kingdom of God

(Mark 1: 14). It contained the announcement of the New Covenant, which had been directly prophesied by Jeremiah (Jer. 31:31). And the very essence of the New Covenant is that God will write His laws into the hearts and minds of those who will ultimately inherit His Kingdom! (v. 35; cf. Heb. 8:10).

In Exodus 21-23, Moses gave statutes and judgments that applied the principles of the Ten Commandments to the civil government of the nation of Israel. It was a nation that didn't really have a heart to obey (Deut. 5:29). In the judgments rendered in Exodus 21 and 22, the key word is "if." "IF someone does this, then here is what you do," Moses told them. Nevertheless, the basis of God's covenant with Israel was His great spiritual law, summed up in the Ten Commandments (Deut. 4:13).

Just as Moses gave statutes and judgments at the inception of the Old Covenant, so also did Jesus Christ when He began announcing the New Covenant. The Sermon on the Mount is Christ's summary of what is involved for those who would participate in this New Covenant and eventually inherit the Kingdom of God.

Fulfilling the Law

"Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill," Jesus told His disciples (Matt 5:17). Of course, most professing Christians-theologians included - do think that Christ came to in some way weaken or countermand the obligations of the law.

The Greek term translated "destroy" is *kataluo*, which means to loosen, disintegrate or demolish (The New Englishman's Greek Concordance and Lexicon, 1982, p.474). In Matthew 24:2, this word is translated "thrown down," when Jesus spoke to His disciples of the utter destruction that would occur to the temple. Clearly, then, according to Matthew 5:17 above, Christ did not come to throw down the law.

He went on to say that He was coming to "fulfill." Now what did He mean by that statement? The Greek word used is *pleroo*, which literally means "to fill up." It is used in Matthew 13:48 to describe a net filled with fish. So once again, when Christ referred to fulfilling the law, He certainly didn't mean He was "throwing it away"! Rather, He indicated that He would fill it up to the very brim! He would reveal its full meaning and intent. And that's exactly what He proceeded to do for those who heard Him.

In Matthew 5:20, Christ told His listeners, "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." The Pharisees prided themselves on

their scrupulous and meticulous observance of the law. The scribes wrote out copies of the law and taught it to others. Yet, according to Christ, we must go far beyond them in obedience or we won't even be in the Kingdom of God. How is that possible?

For all the attention paid to the law by the Pharisees, they missed the whole point of what God was after. They added many of their own "dos and don'ts" to God's commands, but often failed to perceive His intent. In fact, they missed it by a country mile! Much of the time they sought loopholes to avoid fulfilling even as much of the spirit and intent of the law as they did understand. This is made evident in Christ's scathing indictment of these religious leaders in Matthew 23. He told them, "For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone"! (v. 23). He went on to tell them that they strained at gnats while swallowing camels (v. 24). Truly, they couldn't see the spiritual forest for the physical trees!

Under the New Covenant, God's law, which reflects His very nature, is to be written in our hearts and minds by His Spirit. God's grace makes it possible for our sins to be wiped out through the shed blood of our Savior Jesus Christ. Based upon faith, repentance and baptism, God then imparts His Spirit to the new believer (Acts 2:38). He or she is now begotten as His child. In other words, conversion means that those who would be the heirs of the Kingdom must undergo a change of their innermost nature! As Peter wrote many years later, we become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4).

Christ did not spend His time reciting an endless litany of new rules for His followers. Rather, He magnified the "old rules" - showing what it was that God had really been after all along. The question for Christ's disciples to ask is this: What would God be most pleased with? In order to illustrate what kind of righteousness He desired, Jesus went on to specify six statements from the law. He expressed what they understood, then proceeded with the words "but I say unto you" to lay out His authoritative interpretation of the intent of the law, Christ gave spiritual principles and illustrated them to explain what the law REALLY meant. This is what the spirit of the law is all about.

It may help to think of it this way. The spirit of something is the enlivening or energising principle. The spirit of the law is the principle that gives the particular doctrine (or law) its real purpose and vitality. Christ wanted His followers to be motivated by a new way of looking at life and dealing with others. They were to be developing the very mind of God! In other words, Christ insists that if we are to inherit the Kingdom, we must become just like our Father in heaven (Matt. 5:48).

Amplifying the Commandments

To give a practical illustration of the principles He was teaching, Christ chose the sixth commandment, "You shall not murder" (Ex. 20:13), and showed how much more it meant than what they then understood. Jesus explained that it was not just the physical act of murder that would result in God's judgment, but unjustified anger as well (Matt. 5:22). Expressions of contempt are the outgrowth of feelings of anger and hostility. They reflect the spirit of murder. It's not enough simply to refrain from intentionally killing someone. Christ told His disciples to get rid of the very attitudes that could motivate such an act.

He went on to emphasize that reconciliation with fellow human beings goes hand in hand with reconciliation with God. We must have a willingness to make amends and a desire to heal damaged relationships if we expect to be received by our Creator. Reluctance to do so indicates that the spirit of murder is being harbored somewhere within us-somewhere below the surface. And what's inside is critical. For God does not approve of a false front. He wants our relationships with others and with Him to be pure-motivated by real, godly love.

After discussing the spirit of murder, Christ proceeded to discuss another of the Ten Commandments: "You shall not commit adultery" (v. 27). He emphasized again that avoidance of the physical act wasn't sufficient. God desires much more of those who would inherit His Kingdom. As Christ went on to explain, lustful thoughts violate the spirit of the seventh commandment, even if there are no physical acts accompanying them.

This surely must seem strange to many in modern Western society where the appeal to lust permeates not only television, movies and music, but even advertisements for everyday consumer goods that don't really have anything to do with sexual passion! Our culture is so pervaded by that which is lustful and sexually provocative that these attitudes have come to seem normal to us. So much so that the very idea of avoiding all sexual activity outside of marriage is viewed by many as quite unrealistic. This just shows how skewed our modern society's concept of reality really is. For if the reality of God, His Kingdom and His coming judgment were truly grasped, then we would be willing to go to any lengths to avoid sin! (v. 30).

Examples from the Statutes

After quoting two of the commandments and showing the real intent that underlay them, Jesus went on to quote two of the statutes Moses had given Israel. Again He proceeded to explain God's real intent to his listeners - which was radically different from the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees.

First, Christ quoted from Deuteronomy 24:1, a statute dealing with divorce. The emphasis put on this statute by the Pharisees centered around the technicalities of what constituted a valid divorce certificate. The exact details became a controversial subject of the day. Once again, the Pharisees had clearly missed the whole point. For God hates divorce! (Mal. 2:16).

Later in His ministry, when the Pharisees sought to draw Him into one of their interminable arguments about the exact meaning of this statute, Christ responded with an answer that focused their attention on the spirit of the law (Matt. 19:1-9). Rather than arguing with them, Jesus told them to reflect upon God's original intent. He reminded them that in the beginning God had created one man and one woman. This was a clear indication of the Almighty's design for the family. "What God has joined together, let not man separate," Jesus commanded (v. 6). It's true that God had allowed this practice because of the hardness of their hearts (v. 8), but from the beginning it was never meant to be. Now, Jesus was setting the record straight!

In Matthew 5:32, Jesus made it plain that one of the only acceptable reasons for someone to take the initiative in divorcing a mate was because of serious and persistent acts of immorality. The Greek word *porneia*, translated "fornication" in the King James Version, was used in the Greek language to not only indicate sexual activity prior to marriage, but also a whole range of seriously immoral acts including homosexual relations. The spirit and intent of God's law takes a very high view of the sanctity of marriage. The Creator is not impressed by people looking for loopholes and technicalities in an attempt to thwart His very purpose for mankind. Their failure to follow the spirit of the law in this area led Christ to refer to the religious leaders of His day as an "evil and adulterous generation" (Matt. 12:39).

Another major area in which the Pharisees totally missed the point of what God was really after concerns oaths. In Matthew 23:16-22, it's made clear that they spent a lot of time debating which oaths were more valid than others. Christ showed them just how futile this was by emphasising that God's real desire and intent was for people to simply tell the truth on all occasions. The idea that truth was obligatory under certain conditions and not under others is alien to the very character and nature of our God.

Scripture is always true (cf. John 17:17). God can absolutely be counted on to fulfill His promises. Those who would be part of the Kingdom that God is going to establish must themselves be men and women of truth. Christ emphasised to His followers that rather than take any oaths whatsoever, they should simply let their yes be yes and their no be no (Matt. 5:37).

How to Treat Others

There is something greater and nearer to the heart of God than justice. That something is mercy! Christ went on to explain that principle. "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" is quoted from Exodus 21:24 and subsequent places in the civil code that God gave to ancient Israel. It wasn't talking about personal retaliation, but rather about the way in which justice was to be administered by the civil courts. It simply meant that the punishment should fit the crime. And the punishment dealt with value. The transgressor was to pay the value of what it would cost the victim to lose a tooth, for example.

In Christ's day, however, many had come to view "getting even" as their God-given right. They used this statement in the law as a basis to justify their quickness to defend themselves against any perceived injustices. Christ explained what God is looking for in our handling of life's difficulties. In the first century it wasn't uncommon for the Roman government to be abusive to residents of occupied Palestine. Roman soldiers would sometimes force a man into service and require him to carry the mail for a mile. Consequently, resentment seethed beneath the surface of Judean society. The Zealots, who promoted armed rebellion, had much sympathy from the people. But Christ explained that those who would enter His Kingdom weren't going to be "demanding their rights," but rather would show an example of giving and serving.

Christ emphasised the way of give in Matthew 5:41-42. Of course, as other verses show (cf. Acts 3: 16), what we actually give may not always be what is requested. Nevertheless, an emphasis on "me, my and mine" is contrary to what God seeks to develop in His children.

The other statement from the law that Christ selected for comment was taken from Leviticus 19:18: "You shall love your neighbor." Many of the Jews of that time interpreted this scripture to mean that it was good to show kindness to those who were your friends, but you were certainly free to retaliate against those who weren't. As with the other examples we've seen, those who took this approach totally misunderstood the spirit of the law. Christ enjoined His followers to have the very attitude of God Himself.

Helping those who help you is something that makes sense even to those who make no pretence of religion. Once when Christ discussed the importance of loving our neighbor with a religious scholar, he sought to justify himself for his lack of loving concern for his fellow humans. He asked Christ this question: "Who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29). Jesus responded by telling the story of a man who was I beaten, robbed and left for dead by the side of the road. A priest and a Levite both passed by the scene and continued on their way. Finally a Samaritan

came along and stopped to render aid. After concluding the story, Christ asked the question, "So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?" (v. 36). Clearly, the one who stopped and helped. The meaning is clear. We must be a neighbor to anyone with whom we come into contact.

Christ's whole emphasis in expounding the spirit of the law was to show that God wants us to become just like Him! The spirit of the law is an expression of God's intent and purpose for each one of us. Do Christians have to keep the commandments? Absolutely! But not merely in the letter - rather in their full spirit and intent.

Watch for the final installment of our series on the Sermon on the Mount in our next issue. We will be examining Christ's authoritative teachings concerning relationships with both God and our fellow man.

PART 3

America is a religious nation. At least that's what people tell the pollsters. Over 95% of the population professes a belief in God. In addition, nine out of ten households have at least one Bible. The overwhelming majority - 87% in a Newsweek poll - believe that God answers prayer, and about half of the population claims to pray on a regular basis.

In addition, religion is big business. Billions of dollars are contributed to churches and religious ministries. There are churches throughout the land. Late night radio, as well as Sunday morning television, is crowded with preachers. These churches and ministries come in all shapes and sizes.

It seems that whatever you're looking for, it's out there. Whether it's incense and ritual or a rock band complete with drums and electric guitars, there's a church that offers it. From stiff and formal to spontaneous and emotionally-charged, there's a church to suit every taste. Additionally, churches come with a wide range of emphasis - from social action to "soul-winning."

Yet in spite of being seemingly awash in religion, America is also beset with burgeoning moral problems. Divorce, pornography, abortion and violence have all increased to an unprecedented degree during this century. Though politicians regularly invoke God and religion, political scandals abound. There appears to be a great paradox in the comparison between what the nation professes and what it practices.

What kind of religion is really acceptable to God? What is He really looking for in the lives of those who profess to be followers of Jesus Christ? Our entire Western

World has historically claimed to be Christian. In fact we have exported various forms of Christianity to the rest of the world for centuries. To what extent, however, do the various approaches to Christianity common in our modern world square with what the Bible really says? In the Sermon on the Mount, given near the beginning of His ministry, Jesus Christ of Nazareth outlined what He expected of His followers. The claims He made on those who would be His disciples were truly radical. In fact, the pronouncements of Jesus flew directly in the face of what passed for religion in His day. Moreover, they still fly in the face of what passes for religion in our day! In this final installment of our three-part series on Christ's Sermon on the Mount, let's carefully examine the demands that Jesus of Nazareth made upon His followers.

Three Pillars of Jewish Religion

Perhaps the essence of being viewed as "religious" in first-century Judea involved prayer, fasting and the giving of alms. After having explained the spirit of the law to His hearers - as we saw in our last installment - Jesus Christ next addressed the heart and core of "being religious."

In Matthew 6:1-18, Jesus made plain that it wasn't simply what you do, but rather the attitude and motive behind what you do. To Jesus, it was a given that His disciples would do the things just mentioned. After all, He said, "when you do a charitable deed" (v. 2), "when you pray" (v. 5) and "when you fast" (v. 16) - not if. However, the manner in which the act was carried out was crucial.

Christ called those who practiced their religion for the purpose of impressing others "hypocrites". This English term derives from a Greek word that originally referred to actors on the stage. Jesus likened certain "religious" people of His day to those who simply played a part. Their religion was not a simple matter of personal piety, but rather of ostentatious display.

Christ's point was that we're to live our lives before God, being deeply conscious of His watchful presence. When we seek to call public attention to our religious devotion or to our prayers, we are seeking the praise of men, not of God. So why do people do this? Simply because God isn't very real to most people!

Note the attitude of many religious people in Jesus' day: "Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God" (John 12:42-43). The invisible God seemed far off and remote to these religious people. And sadly, He seems the same way to most people today.

Christ emphasized to His disciples that prayer was private and personal communion with God. It was to be done from the heart, not according to rote and ritual. Ironically, the very words that Christ gave to His disciples as an outline for prayer (Matt. 6:9-13) have been made into something to be rattled off by rote by many professing Christians. Yet this "Lord's Prayer," as it has come to be known - or by some as the Pater Noster ("Our Father") - was given in the very context of Christ exhorting His hearers, "But when you pray, use not vain repetitions as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking"(v.7). Christ was giving them instructions about how they should pray - not what they should pray!

Also, Christ clearly wasn't trying to convey that private prayer should never be lengthy, as some might interpret this passage. He Himself prayed at length on various occasions (cf. Luke 6:12). His point was for His followers to avoid meaningless, repetitive prayers. Our Father knows the needs of His children, yet He wants us to learn to ask Him for these needs in confidence and trust.

One important aspect of our prayers that is highlighted here (Matt. 6:12-15) involves asking God for forgiveness. Christ emphasized that in order to receive forgiveness for ourselves, however, we must also give it to others. Of course, our forgiving of others doesn't somehow earn God's forgiveness for us. Rather, it is evidence of the humble and contrite heart that God requires of those who receive His mercy.

First Things First

We live in a world where myriads of "things" compete for our attention and our affection every single day. There are demands made upon our time from seemingly every corner. In this day of cellular phones and pocket pagers, fewer and fewer seem to ever really "get away from it all". Whether driving down the road in an automobile or eating in a restaurant, people are often trying to do two or more things at once.

In our materialistic age, advertising attempts to lure us to "have it all." Whatever we already have, there's probably a new and improved model which, as the ads tell us, we simply can't afford to be without.

The multiplication of two-career households has radically changed the American family in recent decades. Increasing numbers of couples are either foregoing having children altogether or else limiting themselves to one child. Day care centers have become a major industry. Consequences of our society's materialistic, hedonistic perspective are increasingly evident in the horrendous problems of our youth. How, then, could we go unaffected?

Yet Christ judged materialism harshly. Now, the Bible nowhere condemns wealth itself. In fact, various individuals in both the Old and New Testaments are described as being wealthy. Abraham had great herds and flocks and Philemon had a home large enough to accommodate the entire Colossian Church as a meeting place. It's all a matter of priorities. Finances becomes a problem if we begin to put them before God - a real danger. Christ explained that no one can serve two different masters (7:24). To attempt to do so will involve us in a struggle with conflicting loyalties. So He told His followers that they simply couldn't be a servant to both God and money.

Instead, God should always come before everything else. This is a truly foreign concept to the world around us. For though most people are completely in favor of religion, they often compartmentalise it as only one small area of their lives. In reality, the true religion of the Bible is an entire way of life that should determine all of our other priorities, whether in the realm of family, employment or even entertainment.

Perhaps the most fundamental principle of the Bible is that no one ever truly gets ahead by putting God last. Christ said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all [your needs] shall be added to you" (v. 33). God knows that we have physical needs - and will certainly provide for them. After all, He is the One who designed us as physical creatures. So Christ continues, "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself"(v. 34 NIV). If we are walking with God in all of our ways, then worry and anxiety will be put away. We will be developing a firm reliance upon and confidence in God in all aspects of our lives. This is the result of putting first things first.

Judging and Asking

What did Jesus mean next in Matthew 7:1 when He instructed His hearers not to judge? After all, every time we make a choice we render a judgment, don't we? From the time we arise in the morning until we go to bed at night, we are confronted with choices to make.

Contemporary Western society prides itself on being very nonjudgmental. Behavior once defined as "deviant" or "perverse" is now considered an acceptable "alternative lifestyle." In many of our schools, this approach is being promoted to young children. Books such as "Heather Has Two Mommies" have been used in elementary schools to present homosexuality as "normal." Is this the approach Jesus had in mind?

The Greek verb rendered "judge" here, krino, has a wide range of definitions. It can mean to make a judicial ruling, to condemn or to discern. As the Expositor's Bible Commentary explains, Christ wasn't here forbidding "all judging of any kind,

for the moral distinctions drawn in the Sermon on the Mount require that decisive judgments be made. Jesus Himself goes on to speak of some people as dogs and pigs (v. 6) and to warn against false prophets (v. 15-20)" (vol. 8, p. 183). Rather, in Matthew 7 Jesus is exhorting His disciples not to be judgmental and condemning in dealing with people. We aren't to have a negative, critical, "holier-than-thou" attitude towards others. The one who takes it upon himself to stand in judgment of the hearts of others is usurping the place of God, the Judge of all mankind. Christ says that such a person will be called into account by the very One whose role he usurps - and will be judged by Him!

As He went on to explain in verses 3 through 5, before we can take the "speck" out of someone else's eye, we must first get rid of the "log" in our own eye. How can we help others by pointing out some small mistake or fault when we are a thousand times more guilty - and are thus blaring forth our hypocrisy? Rather than pointing the finger at everyone else, we need to go to God and ask Him to reveal to us our own faults - so that we can change. Then we can effectively serve others, helping them to overcome their weaknesses.

We must come to see that God is very real and really does answer prayer. Christ told His disciples to ask, seek and knock (v. 7) - and that God would be there to provide. Even human fathers, with all of their natural human selfishness, would never dream of giving their own children something hurtful when they were hungry and had asked for food (v. 9-10). Christ then emphasized how much more willing our Heavenly Father is to give good gifts to His children when they ask (v. 11). For God's way is a way of give - of love and outflowing concern.

And God's way must become our way. "So in everything," Jesus said, "do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets"(v.12 NIV). Known as the Golden Rule this familiar statement helps to summarize all that Jesus had been teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Here He showed the true direction to which all of the instructions of the Old Testament pointed. Interestingly, this principle was taught in its negative form by the rabbis of Christ's day. Quoting a statement by Rabbi Hillel, dating from about A.D. 20, the Talmud states, "What is hateful to you, do not to anyone else" (b Shabbath 31a). By stating it in the positive form as He did, however, Jesus included sins of omission as well as commission.

Two Paths, Two Trees and Two Houses

In the conclusion to His teaching on the Mount, Christ drew a series of contrasts. If we are truly to be a disciple of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, then we must learn to make the right choices while rejecting the wrong ones. From the days of our first parents, Adam and Eve, God has intended that mankind confront contrasting choices and thereby learn to choose what's right.

The pathway that leads to eternal life is depicted by Jesus as a narrow way traversed by comparatively few. It is contrasted with the wide and popular pathway where the many are to be found. Those who follow in the footsteps of the Messiah will find that the path is often difficult and fraught with peril (v. 13-14). As the Apostle Paul explained, the pathway that leads into the entrance of the Kingdom passes through many hardships (Acts 14:22). It is the pathway of righteousness, which is illuminated by the lamp of God's Word (Ps. 119:105).

Next, Jesus drew a contrast between two trees. One yielded good fruit and the other yielded bad. The fruit produced testifies to the kind of tree which produced it. Christ told His listeners that they would encounter false prophets but that they could discern the true from the false on the basis of the fruit they produced (Matt. 7:15-20). These false prophets would, of course, claim to be true ones - but the evidence of their life and teaching would belie their claims.

For simply paying lip service to Jesus Christ as "Lord" (v. 21) - as our present society does - is not enough. Rather, the word "lord" means owner or master. If Christ is truly our Lord and Master, we will be following His instructions. Christ told those who asked of Him the way to eternal life that they should keep His Father's commandments (Matt. 19:17). God's commandments reflect His will, and only those who actually submit to and practice His will can enter His Kingdom. And those who claim to profess Christ with their mouths, but whose message and actions proclaim them as workers of lawlessness, will find themselves denied entrance into the Kingdom that Jesus Christ came announcing (7:21).

The last of the contrasts drawn in the Sermon on the Mount is that between two houses. One was built on solid rock and the other was built on sand. When storms came one house remained standing and the other collapsed - "and great was its fall" (v. 24-27). Nothing can be more substantial than the foundation upon which it is built. Jesus likened those who listened to His words and then proceeded to put them into practice in their lives to the man who built his house upon the rock - a solid, sure foundation.

You see, it's not enough to merely hear the Truth, to know it academically or even to acknowledge it and to pay lip service to it. The Truth of God is something that must be practiced in our everyday lives. Jesus the Messiah came with a powerful message that directs His followers to a radical transformation of their own lives - including their priorities and even their innermost thoughts, attitudes and motives. His listeners stood amazed. For He didn't teach the way they were accustomed to. Rather, "He taught them as one having authority" (v. 28-29) - indeed, having absolute authority, as He was the very Creator of mankind (Eph. 3:9).

Almost 2,000 years later, the teachings of Jesus still have authority. His words are indeed the very words of life (John 6:63). In the Sermon on the Mount, the

Messiah announced the essence of His teachings to those who aspired to inherit the Kingdom that He came proclaiming. It is imperative that each of us personally take the words to heart and put them into practice in our lives - always.