

## A Sampling of Jesus' Teachings in Matthew's Gospel

The most important event in all history is the coming to earth of the Son of God. The incarnation, life, death, resurrection and promised return of Christ Jesus is the greatest reality in all existence. God Himself stepped into His creation and did a mighty, cosmos-shattering work of redemption, a work that goes to the very essence of what human life means. So it should be not merely worthwhile but *essential* to know what Jesus taught. Jesus is, after all, the Prophet foretold in Deuteronomy 18, whose words we are *required* to obey (18:19). He is the "Lord" Jesus, and that is no mere title; He rules over all creation, including over us. He calls us to be His followers, which means we commit to imitating His Person and work and adhering to His teachings. Indeed, in view of who He is, no other response is appropriate. So let's examine some of His teachings here.

For this necessarily limited study, I will simply page thru the Gospel of Matthew and comment on some of His teachings, for they communicate to us in a straightforward way God's thoughts, values, and priorities, indeed, His will for us. (Jesus' parables all require interpretation, so I'll leave them and His miracles for another study. Also, I've discussed at length certain teachings in previous lessons, such as 10:38-39 and 16:24-25, and I'll not repeat them here.)

**"It is written . . . "** (4:4-10). Jesus three responses to the devil at the temptation in the wilderness are actually also teachings for us. Quoting the O.T. verse that we don't "live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God," Jesus intends for us, His followers, likewise to shape our lives according to Scripture. God has revealed Himself and His will for us, which *itself* places us under obligation to know and obey Him. We're not free to live as pagans do, or according to their worldviews or philosophies. Jesus here affirms the O.T. Scriptures as our model for life, as well as to use to defend against demonic assault. Quoting the O.T. verse that we're "not to put the Lord God to the test," means we dare never presume upon God. Or upon His grace. Pagans all attempt to manipulate their gods; believers must *never* try to do that with our God. He is the sovereign Ruler of the universe, resplendent in glory, and trying to be familiar with Him is pure arrogance. Jesus' quote of the O.T., that we're "to worship and serve God only," which means we're to serve God! "Serving God" means we sacrifice ourselves, our time, assets, energies, etc, for God's will, and that is our worship of Him. That's because worship is really ascribing to Him our estimate of His worth, and the degree of loss we suffer for His sake speaks to His worth.

**"Blessed are . . . "** (5:3-10). Jesus' teaching ministry began deliberately with the so-called Beatitudes. These aren't merely wise words, good advice for Christians, but descriptions of what followers of Christ are to be like. They're to be humble, disgusted with sin and desperate for righteousness, loving of others, holy, and willing to embrace weakness and suffering for Christ's sake. (I've discussed these Beatitudes at length in a previous Sunday School lesson, and I refer readers to that.) The rest of the Sermon on the Mount, indeed the rest of the New Testament, will expand on these very themes. (And even add to them!) These themes expand on the commands in the Old Testament to love God and to love our neighbors. These Beatitudes followed by the Sermon on the Mount are like the Ten Commandments given to Israel, that the Mosaic Law then unpacked. Jesus is showing here what the true meaning of that Law was. Thus, not only don't murder, but don't even be angry with others or hold others in contempt (5:22); not only don't commit adultery but don't even allow lust in your heart (5:28). We're to have, in other words, a certain type of character. The kind of person we are matters as well as our fulfilling certain deeds, which anyone could do. We're to be people living at peace with contentment according to God's instructions.

**"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. . . "** (5:44). This teaching dramatically reflects God's own character. We're all – *all of us* – His enemies, having rebelled against Him and given ourselves over to Satan. Yet He loves us and sacrificed Himself in order to save us from our sins and from Satan's dominion. So by loving our enemies we reflect God's beautiful and holy Person. But it's deeper. God says, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," which means it's not our role to get even or even to *want* to get even with those who offend us. We're instead to show love to all, trusting that God in His time and in His way will establish justice in His created world. This verse leaves no room for holding grudges, or for feeling "hurt" or "traumatized," or being a "victim" or a "survivor." In this pagan world that our nation has become, we're surrounded by many who hate us and want to see us disappear. We share the Gospel with them, pray for them, and leave the outcome to God. We show love. If we're a follower of Jesus, indwelt by His Spirit, we can do that. Jesus command that we forgive others (6:14-15) is an aspect of showing love. Some Bible teachers say we should only forgive those who apologize to us and/or who seek our forgiveness. No! Wrong. Forgiving others is unconditional, it flows from a heart of love for others; it expresses the loving, forgiving Spirit who lives in us. If God only forgives those who take responsibility for their sins and repent, that's God's justice, not ours.

**“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth . . . but store up for yourselves treasure in heaven”** (6:19-20). Christ isn’t demanding an austere lifestyle here, but for us to set priorities: we’re here to serve Christ. We therefore need to keep life simple and uncomplicated in order to be faithful to Him. If we’re to be willing to lay down our lives for Him, surely we should be willing to do that which is less, which is live wholly for Him. The world puts lots of “treasure” on offer, and many of us have the means to avail ourselves of it. Christ is saying here, “live for Me instead.” So we lose out on some of the many and varied things Satan makes available. So what! All those things are only distractions to keep us from serving God. We need to have Jesus’ attitude of being dependent on God for whatever we need to get thru life. That’s why Jesus said, **“Do not worry about your life . . . do not worry about tomorrow”** (6:25,34). If we’re a follower of Christ, we’re to be concerned about fulfilling God’s will, not serving ourselves.

**“Do not judge, or you too will be judged”** (7:1). Substitute here the word “criticize” for “judge.” We’re to show such love for others that we even refrain from being critical of them – even if they deserve criticism! After all, we live before God’s face, and He knows our motives and thoughts better than we do ourselves. We can be very sure that He has much to be critical of in what He sees in us. Being critical of others isn’t loving. It’s showing how much more moral, how much more thoughtful, or how much more spiritual we are. God loves us with a supernatural, transcending kind of love that sacrifices self at great personal cost. And we’re to love others with that kind of love. **“Every good tree bears good fruit”** (7:17) means that we have to demonstrate to God what kind of person we are. Are we selfish, or do we love others?

**“I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven”** (8:11). Although Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, having come as promised to His people, what He offers is for all humanity. Jesus is God’s gift to redeem a fallen race. We all, blacks, Asians, Latinos, Arabs, aborigines, whatever, are offered a seat at God’s feast table. Racism, nationalism, bigotry – all these things that are so prevalent in our sin-saturated world – are attributes of pagans. Followers of Christ should be thrilled at the thought of every kind of human being as a brother in Christ, sharing a common glorious destiny. May we expend our lives effecting this singular desire of God to bring all humanity, wherever they are in the world, into the kingdom.

**“No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment . . . neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins”** (9:16-17). The new has come and the old cannot contain it. This is radical. In the same sense that what Jesus puts on offer in the Gospel is new and greater than anything Israel had in the O.T., we have to be new, transformed people to contain the blessings and gifts that God has for us. Paul says, “put on the new man.” In the Gospel of John, Jesus calls it the “new birth.” Theologians call this new state “regeneration.” We cannot – *cannot* – be the same person with the same values and priorities and thoughts and desires as we were before we came to Christ. Because if we are, we’re not part of the “new.” To be a follower of Christ is to be transformed by His love and His teachings.

**“Freely you have received, freely give”** (10:8). Jesus sent out the twelve to preach that the Kingdom is near, and He sends us out to do the same. That’s the role of followers of Christ in this era. Why? Because God has given us so much in the way of gifts and blessings and promises for the future. So we are not only to show thanks by doing this, we’re under obligation to do the same as those initial twelve. It’s our mission in life, our role, our service to God. The early church understood this. We don’t. We suppose being passive church-attenders fulfills our role. It’s too sad to discuss here. Christ came to draw beloved sinners to God. Because He was rejected as King, He’s now in heaven, and we’re His hands, feet and mouths to draw people to God. The Kingdom is nearer now than ever, so we need to be more zealous, more committed, and more faithful than ever to the one (*and only*) task that He assigned to us. **“Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven”** (10:32). We need to understand what it means to believe in the Lord Jesus. Over the past 20 years or so, the secular world has demanded that our Christianity must be a private or personal religion. “Keep it to yourself,” the ungodly in our nation scream. And we’ve complied with that! But Christ never had such an attitude of indifference to the lost-ness of others in mind. And how can we? We are (supposedly) following the Creator, the Judge of all, the sovereign Ruler of all, God Himself, who came in love to save fallen humanity. How can we keep that to ourselves???

**“All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved”** (10:22). This is a difficult teaching. The context is persecution, and the teaching here is to remain faithful in spite of it. Probably the intended application when Christ spoke this is to the Time of Jacob’s Trouble, during the Great Tribulation. Yet, elsewhere in the New Testament, repeatedly, believers are exhorted to remain faithful and endure until we reach the end of our lives. God is faithful and immutable, and we’re to be like Him. Of course there may be lapses and failures, but those should not characterize our walk with Jesus. Moreover, we’re surrounded by demons, and they throw at us all that they can.

But if we're in Christ and the Spirit of Christ indwells us, we have the enablement necessary to endure to the end, regardless of our circumstances, regardless what losses we experience. (See Revelation 12:11.)

**"It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master"** (10:25). Jesus here makes it explicit: His disciples (followers) were to imitate Him, be like Him, do as He did. Our goal as Christians is Christ-likeness. The context for this teaching is persecution. We're not to expect better treatment than our Master received (although in America we find ourselves in direct contradiction to this teaching, for now anyway). Yet, in Jesus' mind, we who follow Him are to be extensions of His Person and mission of bringing people into the Kingdom. May we be so faithful!

**"Woe to you . . . Woe to you . . . If the miracles that were performed in you [cities in Judea] had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth"** (11:20-21). Jesus is Savior, but He's also Judge. He has the right to demand repentance and to hold people accountable. We have the pious notion that Jesus is a kind and mild teacher, someone who can be ignored safely, without consequence. Wrong! Tyre and Sidon were destroyed. Jesus here is warning His listeners (and Matthew is warning us): indifference to Him and His teaching is not an option. Following Christ means we're on a path of imitating the Master. The goal of discipleship is Christ-likeness.

**"For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother"** (12:49). Christians have a new identity, one that transcends our earthly identities. We're *in Christ*. We don't simply believe in Christ like we believe in the Pythagorean theorem. To "believe" in Christ means we love Him and we are in intimate fellowship with Him. We want, more than life itself, to serve Him and obey Him. We want to be like Him. We want to see Him in His exalted Person. And we want to be with Him. To know Christ radically changes lives.

**"And He said, 'I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven'"** (18:3). Some teachings are really heavy, and this is one of them. Pride may be one of the root causes of sin. It may be Satan's core sin. And with pride comes the will to be autonomous, and with that the notion of being independent of God. And of course with all that comes self-absorption, love of self. So the terribly solemn words, "I tell you the truth . . ." and "unless . . . you will never enter the Kingdom," are necessary for this crucial teaching. And then comes the word, "change." That word is the key to understanding the purpose of all Jesus' teachings. We need to change to bring ourselves into conformity with God's radical will. So, why "children"? It's not that they're innocent, because they're not. And it's not that they exhibit faith, for example in older people. What then? It's that they model humility. They have to, because in that society, children were at the mercy of adults; they had no status, no possibility of greatness, no possibility of being independent; they had to be humble. Similarly, before God, we have no status, so we too need to be humble. Jesus Himself expressed the selflessness and dependence upon God that He enjoins on us here. We need to be as humble and self-effacing as Jesus. May we reflect deeply on our lives and think about how this critically important teaching will change us.

**"If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to . . . be thrown into eternal fire"** (18:8). This is hyperbole to help us to remember His teachings. And who can forget this? The lesson here is stark because sin is so offensive to God. By the way, this verse has nothing to do with the need to be saved, because if it is, it's works salvation, and that's not Gospel. The lesson is this: Even if we have forgiveness of our sins, we still have a sin nature and we continually sin. We should be so exceedingly sensitive about God's holiness that we do whatever is necessary to avoid sinning. In theology, this is called "mortification," ie, empowered by the Spirit, we suppress our sin nature by consciously and deliberately trying to avoid sinning. (We also reckon it dead by our participation with Christ on the cross, thus Romans 6:1-14; 2 Corinthians 4:10, and other verses). We need to know what righteousness is, what sin is, and *be discerning*. The standard is high: "Whatever is not of faith is sin" (Romans 14:23b). We must be totally committed to holiness. There's no other option if we're in fellowship with the holy God of Israel.

**"For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them"** (18:20). Why two or three? (Or more.) Because it's as believers are in fellowship with each other that love for one another is expressed. And the love they have for each other is Christ's love. Believers are to be in community, because it's in community that love is expressed, and that love reflects and glorifies God, the cosmic Lover. We're to be united with one another in love, peace and joy just as the Persons of the Godhead are. Also, there should be no pride or selfishness if we're in fellowship with one another.

**"I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery"** (19:9). God doesn't divorce His adulterous people Israel. He not only forgives them, He gave His life

sacrificially for them. It's partly because God is faithful to His covenants. But mostly it's because of His unchanging love. Same with us. It's not so much that we're to be faithful to the vows we made when we married. It's mainly this: We're to imitate God in being forgiving and loving even when our spouse deeply offends us or fails us in some way. The deep lesson is this, It's not all about me. It's all about Him. Life isn't to make me happy, but to enjoy God and do His will.

**"Come, follow Me"** (19:21). This is the call to discipleship. It's a call to enter into a loving, intimate relationship with the eternal God who took upon Himself human nature, stepping into His creation to fulfill God's deep purposes. It's Matthew's version of "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." To be a believer is to be a follower is to be a disciple is to be saved. We tend to separate believing in Christ from following Christ, as if it's sufficient to believe in Him for salvation without necessarily being a follower or a disciple. But that's a false dichotomy, based on the (erroneous) assumption that "belief" is mental assent, an acceptance of certain doctrines, the bare minimum necessary for salvation from hell. Jesus knows who is following Him and who isn't (see 7:21-23).

**"Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit"** (21:43). There's been massive misunderstanding about this statement. The word for "people" here is not the Church. Jesus is not teaching that the Church is to replace Israel. To the contrary, He's saying that a future Israel, not that Jewish people who were rejecting Him, will receive Him and be endowed with the Spirit and fulfill all that Israel was intended to do in serving God. Jesus has Ezekiel 36 and 37 in mind. Yes, in this interim era called the Church Age, the Church does what Israel back then failed to do, which is to take the knowledge of Israel's God to the world of Gentile nations. But in the future millennial Kingdom, a future generation of "born again" Jews will serve God as intended. Jesus lived with a continuous awareness of the future, many of His teachings are similarly future-oriented, and we're to think about the future as being as certain if it were a present reality. **"That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. . . . therefore keep watch"** (24:39-42). The future is not something abstract, a hope or a possibility. It's a reality declared in advance by God. Here, to be "taken" means taken for judgment; "left" refers to the righteous who inherit the Kingdom, escaping judgment. We're to think and live now, in this life, preparing for what God has revealed He will do in the future.

**"You have only one Master and you are all brothers"** (23:8). All followers of Christ together form one body, called the Church. This is a radically new and unique entity that has Christ as its head – and no other organization. There's to be no hierarchy of special people in this new body, no offices, no special status for certain people. Some within the church will be gifted, for sure. And in Ephesians 4:11 we see that "pastor" is a gift or a function; it is not an office. "Elders" and "deacons" are functions or roles. But this teaching means that there's to be an equality of all followers, mirroring the equality of the Persons of the Godhead.

**"This is my blood of the covenant"** (26:28). Blood? Covenant? We've heard this in church so often we don't even think what it means. The New Testament is the continuation and completing of the Old Testament and it makes no sense unless we keep the O.T. in mind. In Genesis 15, vv. 9-20, a blood sacrifice was needed to initiate the Abrahamic covenant. In Exodus 24, vv. 6-8, a sacrificial death was needed to initiate the Sinai covenant. Jesus understands His death as the sacrifice that is needed to enact the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36. It was an atoning sacrifice, but it was also a covenant-initiating sacrifice. It is a covenant intended to transform forgiven sinners so that they are new, different people alive to God. Although the New Covenant is for a future Israel, aspects of it apply to us in the church, such as forgiveness, an anticipatory gift of the Spirit, and the responsibility of real transformation into godliness. Taking the Lord's Supper (Communion) is not just a regular church ritual, but to remind us of these truths.

In addition to these straightforward and compelling teachings of Christ, there's something else that's between the lines of the texts that we should recognize. It's not explicit, but it's there! I refer to the thrill and awe those first followers of Christ experienced at His Person. They were actually encountering God Himself right there in their midst, veiled of course by His human nature (at least until the resurrection). And they were amazed, so much so that their lives were totally and permanently changed. They were astonished, exhilarated even, at His authority over sin, over nature, over demons, over sickness, and more. They were astonished at His miracles, at the wisdom of His teachings, and at His unique charisma. And then, they saw Him rise from the dead and ascend to heaven . . . such a wonderful Person they were privileged to know! May we, as we read the Gospels, likewise experience the awe and wonder at the Person of Jesus and love Him as intensely and with as much conviction and commitment as did those initial disciples.

If we're followers of Christ, we're to live out these teachings of His. They are to shape our character, indeed, our lives. If we're not being changed by an encounter with the living, eternal God, in what sense can we say we're following Him?