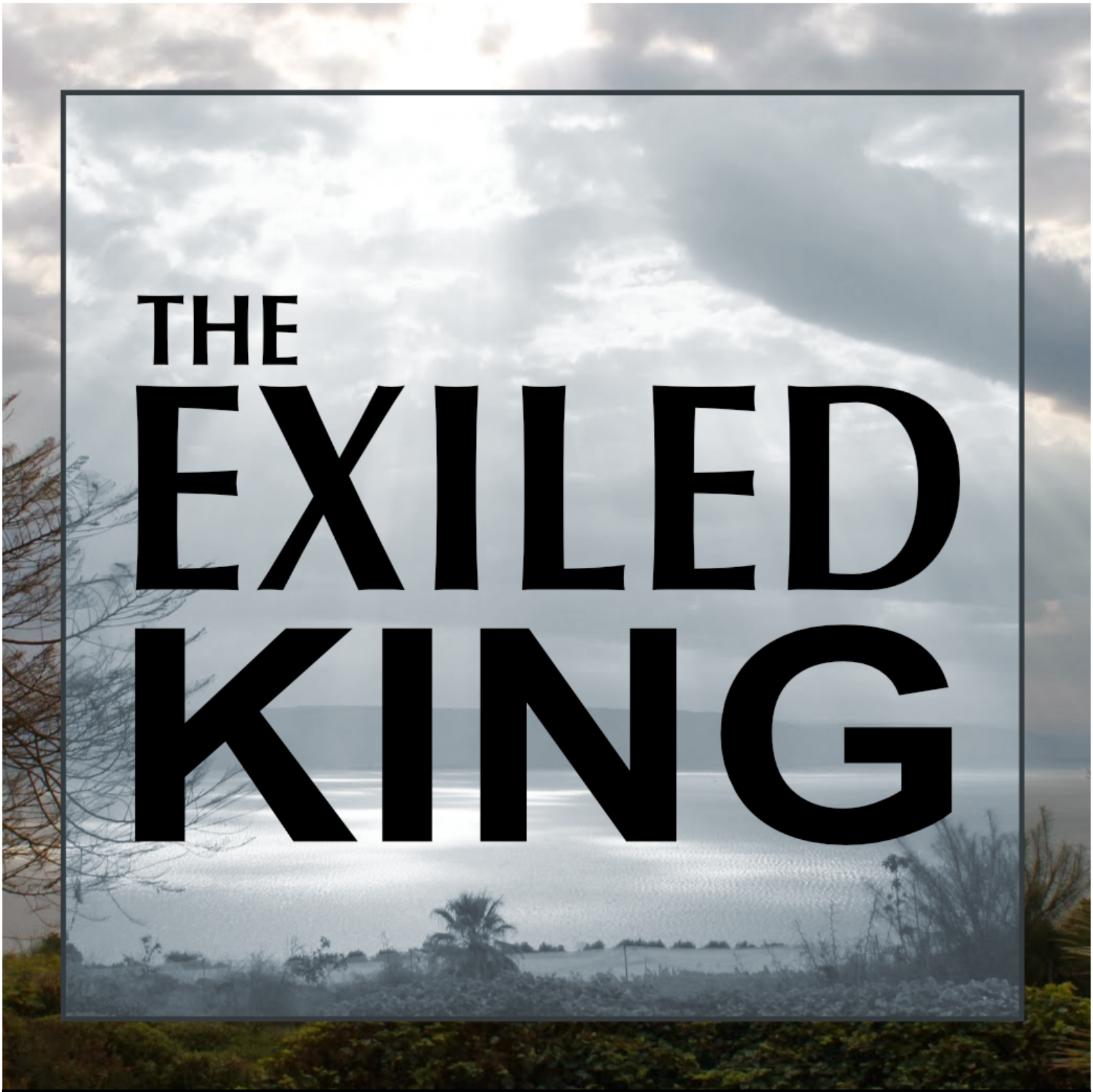

THE EXILED KING

A Guide for Engagement and Discussion

Bedford Road Baptist Church

Introduction

Over the next fourteen weeks, we will be journeying through what is usually called the "Sermon on the Mount." There are two versions of this in the Gospels. The first is found here in Matthew 5–7 and another, shorter version is found in Luke 6:17–49. Probably Jesus preached this sermon many times during his three years of ministry, so it is hardly surprising there are different versions presented.

Reading the Sermon as a Unit

On the surface, it seems the sermon is composed of little, self-contained sermonettes, and this is how most devotional works on the sermon treat it. This is not how it was written, however. Matthew carefully arranged the sermon so that it presents Jesus's teaching in a form known as a *chiasm*. This is named for the shape of the Greek letter *chi,* which looks like an X. This is because it uses arguments that meet at a central idea. In this structure, a teacher works toward a central idea, usually exploring teaching points that are familiar to their listeners. Once the teacher arrives at the central point, he will then work back outward. The teacher's main points reflect and contrast with the points presented at first. Here is a broad, and perhaps even oversimplified, model of the *chiastic* structure employed:

G1 ┌ 5:1–2, Narrative Frame: Setting
F1 ┌ 5:3–16, Discerning the Kingdom: The Beatitudes
E1 ┌ 5:17–20, Main Argument Introduction: Christ and the Law
D1 ┌ 5:21–48, Location of Faith: "You Have Heard It Said"
C1 ┌ 6:1–6, Visible Righteousness: Alms and Prayer
B1 ┌ 6:7–8, Prayer: Attitude
A – A – A – A – A – A ── 6:19–13, The Lord's Prayer
B2 └ 6:14–15, Prayer: Forgiveness
C2 └ 6:16–18, Visible Righteousness: Fasting
D2 └ 6:19–7:11, Location of Faith: "Treasures in Heaven"
E2 └ 7:12, Main Argument Conclusion: The Law Summarized
F2 └ 7:13–27, Discerning the Kingdom: False Teachers
G2 └ 7:28–8:1, Narrative Framework: Reaction

The purpose of this sketch of structure is to help us locate Jesus's individual statements within the broader context, because otherwise we could misinterpret them. The units of text are all part of a greater message, so we need to read them in that context. However, just how much of this framework was intentional and how of it was just a matter of Matthew reporting things as it occurred is impossible to know. Our structure helps us to visually approximate the connections of the argument. Not all of the sections are exactly the same size or utilize the most obvious of structural similarities.

There are, however, observable markers of the units. So, for example, the narrative frame sections marked here with *A's* (5:1–2 and 7:28–8:1) employ the imagery of the mountain and Jesus speaking. Jesus speaks about the Law and the Prophets in E1 and then briefly revisits the idea in E2, although E2 is significantly shorter than E1. Does Jesus abrogate the Law in his set of antitheses in D1? No, not at all. He had already made it clear that the Law is fulfilled in Him. Is he offering a moral code? He's not doing that either. He is rather *locating* our reliance upon the Law, moving it away from the temporal and the Pharisees' obsession with carefully parsing the Law to a faith in the heavenly Law, the "treasures in heaven" he talks about in D2. We do not need to be obsessed and anxious about "getting it completely right" because our own actions are not the merit we rely upon for our salvation.

Journeying Together Through This Guide

This book is a devotional guide, not a devotional. The distinction is important. You are not going to find a lot of pithy sayings that make you feel "ready to go" in the morning. So many devotional books are the equivalent of a spiritual granola bar—a little pick-me-up for the morning. This book is *not that*.

First, I want to encourage you to read the entire Sermon on the Mount in a single sitting every week. Preferably, you should do this out loud. The sermon was delivered out loud, and Matthew went through the work of translating it into Greek so it could be read aloud in worship. If you are reading it from an English translation like the King James Version or the English Standard Version, it was specifically translated into a style of English intended to be read aloud. So, sit down as a family or a couple or get together with some friends from church, or just find a place people won't look at you weirdly, and read it aloud. It will only take 15–20 minutes, and you will be amazed at how quickly you will become familiar with the words and nuances of the sermon.

Second, each week's guide is structured around responding to a passage we have explored the preceding Sunday worship gathering. Attempt to read the week's passage several times during that week. The guides do not follow a strict order, but rather explore different themes within that week's passage. For example, on Sunday, February 11, we will be looking at the Beatitudes (5:1–12). On Monday-Friday of that week, we will consider different aspects of that passage in more detail. The guides will point you to other Scriptures that might shed light upon the topics, but they will also prompt you to meditate upon things like practical applications or insights from the passage.

Third, as we journey together, don't only go forward. By this, I mean don't just fill out pages like this is a school workbook—checking off the to-do list so you can finish all the assignments. Jesus does not teach in a linear way, presenting propositions and proofs. He uses words to create images, parses ideas and then puts them back together, quotes common knowledge and turns it on its head. His style is interrelated. Take time to look back over previous sections. You may find your thinking evolves as you progress. You also should remember that the best interpreter of Scripture is Scriptures, so when you encounter something difficult, the key to understanding it might be in a previous section or it might be further along in the text.

A Note about Scripture and Languages

Generally, the quotations of Scripture here are from the English Standard Version (ESV). In quotes, I have replaced the common "the LORD" with YHWH to avoid confusion. YHWH is a proper name, and although we cannot be certain of the pronunciation (*Yahweh* is the best guess), there are millennia of practice behind rendering this as "Lord" (*'adonaî* in Hebrew, *kyrios* in Greek), I have elected to revert to the proper name. At times, I have provided an alternate English translation of some Scriptures. These are marked in this guide as (AT) and they are meant to supplement your reading of the text, not replace them.

I have tried not to use too much Hebrew and Greek, but it is unavoidable when discussing biblical texts. Transcriptions that appear here are meant to be read as normally as possible. The only major issues you might encounter are the Hebrew guttural letters *aleph* (transcribed as ʾ) and *ayin* (which appears as ʿ). Guttural sounds are difficult for people who do not speak the language, but you can safely *not* pronounce them without too much of an issue. You may also see vowels with an upward carat such as â, ê, î, etc. Biblical Hebrew was written in a consonantal text, without vowels. To clarify which word was being written, the consonants *yod* (י or *y*), *waw* (ו or w), and *het* (ה or *h*) were used to indicate vowels. For example, the word *bat* (daughter) and *bît* (house) would be indistinguishable without these added consonants. The vowels with the upward carats represent these vowels, which are *always* long. Finally, the symbol *š* indicates the *sh* sound as in *shell*.

It is necessary to make one more note about sources. At various times, I cite passages from the Talmud and other sources. The Talmud dates to a time *after* the composition of Matthew, but the teachings it quotes often reflect Jewish traditions that were contemporary with Jesus. They are therefore helpful in providing a possible context into which Jesus was speaking. I was hesitant to include such references, as they can be easily misunderstood; but in the end, I thought it was useful to include them. There is an excellent online repository at https://sefaria.org which you can use to look up the references if you would like. In addition, there are occasional references to non-canonical Second Temple Judaism (STJ) texts such as the Dead Sea Scrolls and pseudepigraphic Jewish works, and to a few historical sources. These citations appear in parenthetical citation, and they are abbreviated following the Society of Biblical Literature Style, 2nd ed. There is a table of the abbreviations on the next page if you want to consult it as you read.

Abbreviated Works

b. Berakot.	**Berakot:** A section of the tractate Seder Zeraim of the Mishnah that deals with blessings.
b. Mak.	**Makkot:** A section of Nezikin dealing with court punishments.
b. Sanh.	**Babylonian Sanhedrin:** a longer version of the Sanhedrin tractate.
b. Šebu.	**Šebuʿot:** The sixth volume of Nezikin that deals with oaths under the ceremonial law.
b. Taʿan.	**Taʿanit:** A tractate of the Talmud devoted to the feast days. The **b.** designates the Babylonian Talmud.
b. Yebam.	**Yevamot:** a section of the Talmud dealing with levirate marriage and conversion.
b. Zebaḥ.	**Zebaḥim:** the first tractate of Seder Qodashim dealing with the sacrificial system.
Cod. Theo.	**The Theodosian Law Code:** a fourth century Roman legal code compiled by the emperors Theodosius II and Valentinian III.
D. Eretz Z.	**Dereḥ Eretz Zuta:** a book of ethics, one of the minor tractates of the Mishnah.
Didache	**The Teaching of the Apostles:** an anonymous early Christian document that deals with matters of doctrine and practice
Gen. Rab.	**Genesis Rabbah:** A midrash on the Book of Genesis from sometime AD 300–500.
Jos. *Wars.*	***Wars of the Jews*:** one of two historical works written by Flavius Josephus in the last decades of the first century AD.
m. Sanh.	**Mishnah Sanhedrin:** part of the Talmud division Nezikin, dealing with damages in legal proceedings.
m. ʾAbot.	**Mishnah ʾAbot:** a section of the Mishnah listing maxims and teachings of great rabbis.
Num. Rab.	**Numbers Rabbah:** A midrash on the Book of Numbers and the last to be added to the Midrash, probably in the eleventh century AD
Pliny. *Nat. Hist.*	***Natural History:*** written by Pliny the Elder (23 BC–AD 55), the largest document from the Roman Empire to survive to modern times.
y. Bab. Qamma.	**Baba Qamma:** A section of the Jerusalem Talmud dealing with civil courts and damages.

Part 1

"Blessed"
Matthew 5:3–12

Monday, February 12

We often misunderstand the Beatitudes because the Greek word *makarios* is translated as "blessed" in our English Bibles. *Makarios* is likely a rendering of the Hebrew *ʾašreh*, which appears many times in the Psalms (Ps 1:1, 32:1, 40:4, 84:5), but rarely outside of it. There is a separate Hebrew word (*barak*) that means "blessing" or "blessed."

Matthew has an affinity for the Book of Isaiah, so we may look there to understand Jesus's use of the word. Consider how it is used in **Isaiah 30:18.**

> Therefore YHWH waits to be gracious to you,
> and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you.
> For YHWH is a just God;
> blessed [*ʾašreh*] are all those who are waiting for him. (AT)

The biblical scholar Jonathan Pennington has proposed that we should render *ʾašreh/makarios* as "flourishing" because it has an active sense while "blessed" has something of a passive feel. He says we should think of Jesus's commands to flourish (rather than blessed) as "a declared observation about a way of being in the world" (Pennington, 2017: 52–53). We are called to *thrive* in a world that may be opposed to our beliefs.

- How would rendering *makarios* as "flourishing" change your reading of the Beatitudes?

- What barriers exist in your life/thinking that restrict your ability to flourish in your Christian walk?

Tuesday, February 13

What does it mean to be "poor in spirit" (v 3)? Poverty always has a sense of emptiness but in the Hebrew Scriptures, it takes the meaning of being oppressed or marginalized (Isa 10:2, 61:1–2). While Jesus promises that the "poor in spirit" will be a part of the Kingdom of Heaven, it is hardly a novel idea.

At a point in which he had lost everything and things looked bleak for him, David wrote the following: "YHWH is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but YHWH delivers him out of them all" (Ps 34:18). It may be that Jesus was citing this reference. Shortly after David wrote this, Saul was killed in battle and David was proclaimed king. At the moment when he was giving the

Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was not much more than a Galilean teacher, but he would shortly be exalted as the Son of David and returning King.

It is a blessing to live in a society where we are not openly persecuted for our faith, but this is the exception in human history. As Jesus reminds his listeners, persecution is the default for those who stand with the word of God. We are not told to rejoice in persecution. That would be odd indeed. We are instead called to rejoice in our place in the Kingdom of Heaven, alongside the faithful (Heb 12:1–2).

For the early believers, who found themselves outside of both Jewish and Gentile worlds, this was a valuable reminder that our kingdom identity is not determined by our elevation or oppression in our present world. Jesus contrasts our *real* situation as part of his kingdom with our "real" situation that we perceive in our current world.

- In what ways are Christians marginalized in our present world? How do you feel about this situation?

- Have you ever felt "crushed in spirit"? What are two or three Scriptures you rely upon to be reminded that you are part of the Kingdom of Heaven?

Wednesday, February 14

Jesus placed a lot of emphasis on the future, offering hope to his listeners. When teaching is focused on a future state, it is called *eschatological*, meaning "looking to the end." At the same time, Jesus offered present promises mixed in with the future hope. As one commentator put it, "The early church found itself living in a tension between realization and expectation — between 'already' and 'not yet.' The age of fulfillment has come; the day of consummation stands yet in the future." (Ladd, 1993: 346)

It is in this tension that we are "poor in spirit" and "meek." It is in the present that we should "hunger and thirst after righteousness," but we will also be "persecuted for righteousness' sake." Often, we think of tension as a bad thing. We like the dissonance to resolve, and we want the tension to release; and yet the tension is where we grow and become *more*. Without the dissonance, we would stay the same and become complacent.

- Spend a little time talking with someone else about the tension you might be experiencing between the present and the 'not yet.' It does not need to be a spiritual situation. Maybe it is just an "everyday" situation or maybe it is something more.

- In what ways does an eschatological focus alter how we might see the present?

Thursday, February 15

The Beatitudes are presented in pairs, and the pairing with mercy is "pure in heart" (vv 7–8). Despite appearances, there is no reciprocity built into the Beatitudes. If we show mercy solely so we will receive mercy, then ultimately it is not mercy (vv. 7–8). Think about it. Mercy has to be given to someone else. Done only so we can receive mercy, it is nothing more than selfishness disguised as altruism. Being pure of heart (*bar-lavav* in Hebrew) does not mean we lack defect. It is a heart awareness of our own sinfulness, a willingness to be honest about our realities. It is likely that Jesus alludes here to Psalm 24:3–4: "And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart [*bar-lavav*]." It is not hard to see how Jesus's statement flows out of the principles in this text, but there may also be parallels to the prophecies of Joel.

> "Yet even now," YHWH declares, "return to me with all your heart,
> with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning,
> and rend your hearts and not your garments.
> "Return to YHWH your God, for he is gracious and merciful,
> slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love [*ḥesed*];
> and he does not want to destroy you." (AT)

This call to repentance is a call to place ourselves within the mercy of God. If mercy flows from a pure heart, it is only when our hearts are placed in the hands of the merciful God of *ḥesed* that they are purified. The call to "rend your hearts and not your garments" is a call to introspection and honesty about our own inner walk, not so we can receive something from God but so we can be honest with the God who is able to give to us as he pleases.

The cause of the blessing is not *our behavior*. In a sort of paradox, we act worthy of what God is doing in us only after he has already begun doing it through Jesus. Mercy and purity of heart are both the results of God's work on us *and* ideals for us to live up to, simultaneously. We are honest with ourselves and God at the heart level, and he is working in us. The 'already' and the 'not yet' cannot be separated in the life of the believer. There is a synergy of the present and the future, as well as our actions in our free will and God's actions as sovereign king.

- Do you catch yourself doing something "good" in the hope of getting something in return? What do you usually do if you find yourself thinking that way?

- How does your thinking about the disciplines of Christian life change if you focus on a synergy with God's work in you rather than trying to obtain something by ethical actions?

Friday, February 16

In verse 12, Jesus defines *makarios* by placing it in parallel with "rejoice and be glad." Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, there is a sense of happiness in proper relationship with God. To be righteous is not just to be compliant with the tenets of the Law. We live out the Law as peacemakers, as mourners, and those who endure

persecution. Righteousness is not defined by our behavior in the comfortable moments, but in those of adversity.

Jesus viewed persecution as unavoidable if one wishes to stand with God's righteousness. Again, we find a superimposition of a mysterious Kingdom with our present circumstances in such a way that they are both contradictory and inseparable. Jesus uses righteousness (*dikaiosynē*) to refer to the "rightness" of justice and God's will, not personal righteousness. It is the higher good of God, and not just observance of the Law. Doubtless, Matthew wants us to see true righteousness in people like Joseph who, as a righteous man, sought not only to observe the Law, but also to care for Mary and her unborn child by not shaming her (1:19). This righteousness *exceeded* that of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20).

- In what ways is Jesus is working toward a "greater law," a different and much simpler view of righteousness, as he develops his sermon, expressing it in Matthew 7:12? How is his understanding different from other religious ethics?

- Many people have attempted to embrace a "biblical ethics" based on defining the Beatitudes as behaviors. How is this different from seeing it as a reflection of the righteousness of God?

"Salt & Light"
Matthew 5:13–16

Monday, February 19

For the Greeks and Romans, salt was one of the pillars of human civilization (Carusi, 2018: 482). "Nothing is more useful than salt and sunshine" (Pliny *Natural History*, 31.102). Good salt is fairly difficult to obtain, because it either has to be mined or extracted from salt water. Cheap salt, usually obtained from bogs and salty soils, was full of impurities. Only wealthy people used salt as a condiment for food. It was primarily used as a preservative, chiefly for fish.

There is another aspect of salt that is rarely mentioned in relation to this statement. Salt was so valuable that it was used to seal covenants between God and Israel. This probably predated the Israelite religion, as sharing something of such value (usually during a meal) would show the commitment to the covenant.

> "You shall salt all your grain offerings with salt.
>
> You shall not let the salt of the covenant with your God be missing from your grain offerings. With all your grain offerings you shall offer salt." (Lev 2:13; cf. Num 18:19; 2 Chr 13:15)

Everyone understood what it meant for salt to become useless, but Jesus's statement would have resonated particularly with his Galilean audience, who were dependent upon salt for the fish trade. Cheap salt could easily lose its saltiness, leaving behind only the useless and impure pollutants. If your salt lost its saltiness (which meant the actual salt was washed away), your catch would be wasted and your livelihood was lost.

The presence of believers is *necessary* for the life of the world. Despite the way the world feels about us, we are God's preservatives, his valuable offering to the world that he has not given up and he still desires a covenant with each and every one of them. But salt must be active in order to accomplish anything.

- Do you feel you are an active "seasoning" presence in your immediate context? What about your church community in the community?

- How can we become more active in our influence on the world without becoming confrontational or political? Is there even a way?

Tuesday, February 20

When Jesus talked about a city on a hill, he was probably referring to the way that Jerusalem was visible to those on pilgrimage. The temple was covered in white limestone and crowned with gold, so it reflected the sun and during the day, it could be visible for miles. Because the terrain to the east of Judea is below sea level, the sun would seem to set much earlier than it really did. The light reflected off Jerusalem would still illuminate the mountainous horizon, not unlike the way cities create ambient light in the sky today. Miles away, you still knew where Jerusalem was because it was the only bright thing in the midst of emptiness.

Four times in Isaiah, Israel is called a light to the nations (Isa 42:6, 49:6, 51:4, 60:3). In particular, the account of the magi following the light of the star may be a fulfillment of Isaiah 60:3. The purpose of a light is not to illuminate itself, but rather to light up its surroundings. Hiding it would be denying the light its very essence of existence. Salt is meant to be, well, *salty*. Light is meant to shine. Those are the natural, most obvious things for them to do. Salt that isn't salty isn't salt. Light that doesn't illuminate isn't light. The actions are reflective of the very essence of both. It is supposed to be in the believer's nature to be a present influence on the world.

- Light is usually taken for granted until it is absent. Have you ever had an experience where your absence was noticed by someone and they spoke to you about how much they missed you?

- Does being light mean we must always be positive or smiley? How do we "illuminate" things in the world?

Wednesday, February 21

The words "earth" and "world" are parallels in many ways, but they are different words in Greek (*gē* and *kosmos*) just as they are in Hebrew (*'eretz* and *tebel*). In both language, there is a blurry but present distinction between the place inhabited ("earth") and the activity of those inhabiting the place ("world"). The "earth" simply is, but the "world" can be controlled by powers in conflict with God (Luke 16:8; John 12:31; 2 Cor 4:4). Both are closely moored to this existence, a reminder that what the Kingdom of Heaven is *includes* a presence in this present world. So often we think of spiritual things as "other," as separate from our current existence.

We are part of this world and yet different from it. As Christians, we are commanded to hold at bay the powers of the world (Eph 6:12). The world is not our prison until we ascend to a higher plane. It is our field in which we work as laborers and stewards (John 4:33–38). We cannot be salt if we do not season. We cannot be light if we do not illuminate.

- What is one aspect of your daily world that needs a little salt? A little light? A little bit of your active faith as your minister to others?

- How often do you pray for the world around you? Is it more or less often than you complain about it? Consider this challenge. For one day, every time you are tempted to complain about something in the world, pray for it instead.

Thursday, February 22

"Good works" get a bad rap in modern Christianity. It is true that our works cannot save us (Eph 2:9). Let's make that clear right up front. As James points out, however, we cannot say we have faith if it is not lived out in our actions (James 2:14–26). The issue is translating the Greek word *ergon* as "works." It is more accurate to render it as "activity" or "actions." Our actions in this world represent God to this world. The heavenly Father is glorified in us when we bring the values and truths of heaven into this world system, when we speak "salty" truth into the false perceptions and bring light upon the things done in the dark (Matt 10:27; Luke 12:3).

Words have no substance. They are just vibrations in the air or ink scratched on a page. While Christians hold to the truth of Scripture, there is something tangible to action. When we act as the Kingdom in the world, we participate in the revelation of God to the world.

- If we read the text carefully, we see that our role as "salt" and "light" is paralleled with "the prophets who were before you" (v 12). How can "good works" serve the same purpose of prophets?

- What kind of activities will draw the focus of those around us to God? To glorify Him? Name one concrete activity that is *not* one of the big three (go to church, share the gospel, read your Bible).

Friday, February 23

"Our Father who is in heaven" (v 16, cf. 6:9, 14) is a formulation unique to Matthew's gospel, and although it is present in some rabbinical literature, it is used very differently here. The Talmud records a tradition concerning the definition of a stranger or foreigner. In this tradition, the stranger is still part of the Father's domain, but is rejected for their behavior.

> "What is the meaning when the verse [Ezek 44:7] states: "Stranger"? [*nekar*] It is referring to one whose actions are considered *estranged from his Father in heaven,* i.e., an apostate, who sins regularly." (*b. Zebaḥ* 22b.5)

In Matthew, Jesus radically alters *how* we think of God (Carson, 1984: 106). Jesus ushers in the idea of a brotherhood in Christ, with the faithful viewing God as Father (Rom 8:29; Heb 2:10–17). He interprets the idea of a stranger not as one who is estranged, but following Isaiah again, Jesus sees the stranger [*nekar*] as being invited into fellowship with God.

> Let not the foreigner [*nekar*] who has joined himself to YHWH say,
> "YHWH will surely keep me separate from his people."
> Let not the eunuch say,
> "Behold, I am a dry tree."
> For this is what YHWH says:
> "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
> who choose the things that please me
> and hold fast my covenant,
> "I will give in my house and within my walls
> a monument and a name
> better than sons and daughters;
> "I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off." (Isa 56:3–5, AT)

Jesus's view of the outsider or stranger could not be more different than the rabbis' view. The foreigner becomes a part of the family, "better than sons and daughters" when he joins himself to God. Thus, "our heavenly father" is not just the Father in heaven, but also the Father of the heavens which span all the earth, under which all of humanity lives.

- Matthew is often called a "Jewish gospel" because of the perception that it was written primarily to Jews. How does unpacking some of these implicit promises to include the Gentiles affect how you read the gospel?

- What estranges a person from God? How does someone who is a "stranger" find a way to "join himself" to God?

"The Law and the Prophets"
Matthew 5:17–20

Monday, February 26

The foundation of Israel's identity was the Law (*tôrah*) and Prophets (*nevi'îm*), the bulk of what we call the Old Testaments. Jesus makes it clear that his purpose is not to wipe this identity out, but to fulfill or complete it. Matthew even phrases the Greek in such a way that it answers objections before they are raised. In essence, Jesus says something like: don't misunderstand what I am saying here.

There is a double meaning to "fulfill" in this context. Jesus both fulfills all the requirements of the Law and the Prophets *and* he provides the proper interpretation of them, in his person and acts. Many of the NT writers relied on the latter for their interpretation of things like sacrifices and the priesthood. Jesus both filled the role of these things, making it no longer necessary for the roles to be fulfilled in the temple, but he also provided the interpretation of these things as symbols of something greater (Heb 10:1–3).

This section is an *inclusio,* meaning it introduces a section of the text. This section will run to the closing *inclusio* in 7:12 when Jesus again references the Law and the Prophets. There, Jesus will explain what the true fulfillment of the Law and Prophets is for the believer, but *that* fulfillment is dependent upon Jesus's much greater fulfillment.

- How do you read the Old Testament, in relation to your own spiritual life?

- What tools would be useful for you in understanding the complex relationship between the Old and New Testaments?

Tuesday, February 27

Jesus believed the Scriptures were meant to outlast all of the ideas and institutions of this world (Ps 119:89). His assertion was fundamental to being a part of the conversation in Judaism, and yet he will demonstrate that when it comes to the text, he did not agree with the Pharisees on their interpretations. The Pharisees had an additional, oral Torah, which was codified as the teachings of important rabbis but claimed to represent traditions going back to Moses. What Jesus meant was something very different from what they believed.

Not all affirmations of the Scriptures are the same. We need to be willing to ask what people mean when they use terms like "biblical." Something that is truly biblical will be in conformity with it. Often people use "biblical"

to mean that they found a verse that supports a position, even if that position conflicts with reality (both Scriptural and empirical). This kind of interpretation by isolation is dangerous.

- How do you evaluate resources (books, music, etc.) for biblical content? Do you have criteria you use?

- What role does the Church have in guiding our evaluation of things "biblical"? How would you assess the work of the Church (at large, not just Bedford Road) in their capacity here? How could they do better?

Wednesday, February 28

What are an *iota* and a *dot?* The *yod* (*jot* in the KJV or *iota* in Greek) is the smallest Hebrew consonant (י), which is made with a single stroke of the pen. The *dot* (*tittle* in KJV, *tilde* in German, and *kepaia* in Greek) is the ending ornament of a horizontal stroke that distinguishes similar looking letters in Hebrew (for example, between כ, the *k* sound, and ב, the *b* sound). These might seem insignificant, but they alter meaning entirely. Jesus's point is that the Law hangs together perfectly, and altering it or omitting part of it would make it *less than* the word of God. He will later make the same statement about his own words (24:35), as a testimony to his fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Jesus makes the point that we cannot relax the Law. We cannot dismiss any of the commandments and say they don't not matter, because they do—even the weird ones. We do not have the authority to loosen the Law up and find some wiggle room for ourselves. As Paul points out, the Law teaches us righteousness, if only by our inability to obey it perfectly (Gal 3:23–29). Jesus's arrival does not loosen it. If anything, his presence reinforces the Law's truth. In Christ, we are no longer obligated to the Law, but it nonetheless deserves our respect as the Word of God.

- Why do you think we tend to classify sin by categories, ranking some as "worse" than others?

- How would you explain the Old Testament Law to someone who asked you why you do not follow it?

Thursday, February 29

The inversion of the greatest and the least is a theme throughout Jesus's ministry. It is often called "the Great Reversal," and you can really see it at work in Luke's gospel where almost everyone who is in a position to hear Jesus (priests, teachers, men) fail to heed him while those who, by all accounts, should not (women, lepers, demoniacs) do hear him and obey. This draws attention to the reality that present circumstances do not dictate our place in the Kingdom of Heaven.

If you read Jesus's statement about the Law in verse 19, he emphasizes that it is not just loosening the commandments. It is about *teaching* that even the smallest commandment can be broken, that it is not important. Teaching that to the least in the kingdom is tantamount to calling into question the testimony of God, and as God is one of the primary witnesses of Jesus's authority and God is always consistent, this calls into question Jesus himself. To demean the Law is to demean grace.

Jesus may also be addressing the tendency of rabbis to use hyperbole to make a point. For example, in a commentary on Deuteronomy 24:16 and 2 Samuel 21:1–6, Yoḥanan ben Zakai, perhaps the greatest of the first century rabbis, argued, "it is better that one letter and one commandment be uprooted from the Torah in this manner and thereby the name of Heaven not be desecrated in public" (*b. Yebam.* 79). In his thinking, one could violate Torah if it meant that God was not shamed before the Gentiles. It is not hard to see the danger that lurks in this justification. Jesus takes the hyperbole to its extreme, focusing not on letters or commandments but the ends of strokes used to make letters.

- If you have dealt with someone questioning the authority of Scripture, how did you respond? Was it an effective response?

- What significance do you place on the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly the Law, in your own study of Scripture?

Friday, March 1

Righteousness was a hot topic in Jesus's day. The Pharisees in particular were obsessed with coming up with the right formula for righteousness before the Law. What is more, righteousness was something that had to be visible for *their* evaluation. Jesus dealt specifically with their public acts of righteousness later in the sermon.

Jesus turns the table on the Pharisees by arguing that their efforts to make a Torah-observant society would "domesticate the Law" rather than promote absolute holiness. He hints that they *know* such holiness is impossible and so have created achievable holiness through their codes and oral law (Carson, 1984: 146).

Paul later took this idea further, seeing the Law as "the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone." It was glorious, but it cannot be truly glorious without the Spirit of God.

> Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone,
> came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face
> because of its glory,
> which was being brought to an end,
> will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory?
> For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation,
> the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory.

Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all,
because of the glory that surpasses it.
For if what was being brought to an end came with glory,
much more will what is permanent have glory. (2 Cor 3:7–11)

- What are your thoughts on the relationship of the Law and Jesus's work? This is a complex issue so, there is room for discussion.

- Why do people like to "domesticate" the Law? Make God's righteousness manageable on a human level?

"Anger"
Matthew 5:21–26

Monday, March 4

Jesus's use of the phrase "you have heard it said" throughout this section (5:21–48, known as "the antitheses") probably indicates that most Jews of the period did not read the Scriptures for themselves (Quarles, 2017: 55). It was not that they were illiterate, but that Torah scrolls were expensive and so not available to everyone. People were dependent upon their rabbis for the synagogue reading and interpretation, probably in a similar way that Jesus is depicted teaching in Luke 4:16–30. When a rabbi interpreted or extended the text in a practical way, it was referred to as "making a fence around the Torah" (*m. ʾAvot.* 1.1; Basser, 2008: 111–113).

At every point, Jesus offers both a Scriptural citation and the interpretation that appears to have accompanied it. These interpretations extend the text, sometimes making them more abstract and sometimes more specific. This is typical of *midrash* or interpretive teaching. Jesus takes every interpretation to its logical extreme to demonstrate that the interpretation itself is faulty. When citing Scripture, Jesus does not say "you have heard it said" but rather "it is written," emphasizing the primary of the written text over the oral tradition (11:10, 21:13, 26:31).

- Interpretation is important when we consider Scripture. What was faulty in the interpretations that Jesus rejected?

- Why do you think it is important that God's revelation is a written record rather than some other medium? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this?

Tuesday, March 5

Three times, Jesus discusses the idea of being "liable" (21, 22). The Greek word is *enoḥos,* and it conveys a sense of guilt and just desserts. In considering the idea of murder, Jesus asks whether lesser sins such as anger or insults are not also sins which should be judged. He asks this because it was common for rabbis to argue that the only sins you could be judged for were those explicitly stated in Torah. Since murder was clearly stated, you could be punished; but insult or even anger were not mentioned as sins and so were not "technically" sins that you could be punished for (Basser, 2015: 139–40). On top of this, one was only punished if there were witnesses, so you could violate Torah but without ample legal evidence, the accusations could be treated as nothing more than rumor, and there would be no punishment (*b. Mak.* 6a; *b. Sanh.* 8b).

Jesus emphasizes the *spirit of the Torah* beyond the letter. The same emotions underly murder, insult, and other expressions of anger. They should all therefore be subject to judgment. This is part of Jesus's fundamental argument. Either *all* of the Law applied to *all levels* of life, or none of the Law applies to any of our lives; and because it is God's Law, the Law should apply whether we can properly try the sin or not.

- Seeing all the hoops the Pharisees jumped through to decide what was "liable to judgment" and what wasn't, what are your thoughts on this kind of thing? How do we balance our evaluations of people's behavior between fairness and legalism? Is there even a way to do so?

- Jesus seems to always push beyond observable righteousness. Do you think he dismisses the idea of appearances altogether? Or is there still a place for evaluating appearances and visible behavior? How does that fit with grace?

Wednesday, March 6

Do you notice that Jesus switched focus all of the sudden? He is talking about judgment on those who do things against their brothers, but then he talks about your brother having something against you (vv 23–24). It is not our actions that we need to deal with at the altar, but with others' attitude. While the Pharisees were obsessed with what could be judged to be a sin, Jesus deals with the reality of sin. If you did something against someone else, it is sin whether "the council" thinks it is or not. The early church saw this as an extension of Malachi 1:14, and in the *Didache* (an early handbook for churches written after the time of the apostles), they wrote this:

> And on the Lord's own day gather yourselves together and break bread and give thanks, first confessing your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure. And let no man, having his dispute with his fellow, join your assembly until they have been reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be defiled; for this sacrifice it is that was spoken of by the Lord, "in every place and at every time offer Me a pure sacrifice; for I am a great king, saith the Lord, and My name is wonderful among the nations." (*Didache*, 14:1–3)

In other words, sin—even sin that can't be "proven" to a judging council—corrupts the relationships of the faithful. It taints our worship, and so while it might not be "a big deal" to you, as a believer you are not in isolation. You are part of a community and that community is affected.

- Why do you think Jesus elevates the right relationship above the "right" outward signs?

- Do you find yourself thinking only about the personal implications of sin rather than the relational aspect? What have you done in your life to retain your awareness of relational righteousness?

Thursday, March 7

In verse 22, the ESV text says "whoever insults his brother," but the underlying Greek text has a very specific insult transcribed from Aramaic. A literal translation is, "Whoever says *râqa'* to his brother." This was a remark that was often used in the household, particularly to younger siblings and servants. It was generally not considered a particularly harsh insult, more of a casual statement on par with "what were you thinking?" or "come on, man!" The word translated as "you fool" is the Greek *mōros* (the root of our word "moron") and while commentaries try to find an Aramaic equivalent, it is likely that Jesus is supplying a parallel for his bilingual audience. He makes *râqa'* and *mōros* equivalent, appealing to both the Hebrew/Aramaic and Greek speakers.

The Talmud includes a later story of Rabbi Elazar b. Shimon (2nd century AD) insulting a man. Deep in thought as he rode along the river, Elazar was greeted by a man. When Elazar looked at him, he was taken aback by how ugly he was, and Elazar exclaimed, "*Râqa'!* How ugly is this man! Are all the men of your city as ugly as you are?" The man then responded, "You should go and say to the 'Craftsman Who Made Me', *how ugly is the vessel you made.*" (*b. Ta'an.* 20b) It is possible that this story reflects Jesus's teachings in a Jewish setting, but it is also possible that it represents a traditional fable reset in Elazar's context. The insult is not an attack on the person, but on the person's Maker. In other words, it questions God's sovereignty.

This idea that attacking the creation is attacking the Creator is hardly new. It was fundamental to Hebrew law (Gen 9:6). By using such a casual, *flippant* insult as *râqa'*, Jesus is not trying to argue that we never say anything like this, but that we cannot categorize sin into boxes of "bad enough to be judged" and "it was just for fun" or "it isn't that big of a deal."

- Does this discussion make you think about how we might dishonor God in the ways we talk or think about one another?

- What other Scriptures might speak to this issue of treating others? Can you see Jesus's teaching here as possibly the foundation for the apostles' opposition to showing favoritism in the church (for example, James 2:1–13)?

Friday, March 8

Jesus's last statement in the section seems a bit out of place. Why does he emphasize that his hearers could be kept in prison "until you have paid the last penny" (v 26)? The Greek word translated as "penny" is the Greek version of the Latin *quadrans,* which meant "one fourth" because it was roughly the pay for one-quarter of an hour's work in the Greco-Roman world. We can again see how Matthew's gospel bridges Jewish and Greek worlds, with an illustration that would have been familiar only to those who used Greco-Roman currency, and it may also hint at Jesus's familiarity with the Greco-Roman pay scales if he worked as an artisan alongside Joseph, who would have been employed on many projects for their Gentile masters.

This was a very small amount of money, which could easily be considered a "margin of error" so Jesus uses it to illustrate that *all sin* must be fully accounted for. Many read this as a primarily ethical teaching, but undergirding the ethics is a theology of full recompense for sin, something which must be satisfied. Surely, if man can be imprisoned for an offense against another, man should be punished for offenses against God.

At every point in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is driving at this point to show that we can never satisfy every requirement of the Law, so it is hardly surprising that the to "forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors" sits so prominently in the central prayer (6:11). Our relationship to others is a reflection of our relationship with God, because man is created in the image of God. The subtle bigotry and condescension of the Pharisees and Sadducees was not righteousness. It was in conflict with God's intention for relationships.

- This week, you may have noticed a strong emphasis on relationships. This is because believers do not live in isolation. Our relationships matter. What is one relationship you can identify as "needing work" this coming week?

- What concrete steps will you take to work on that relationship? (Hint: your first step should be to *immediately* tell the person you have to work on the relationship and restore health.)

"Immoral"
Matthew 5:27–32

Monday, March 11

Most modern readers do not understand that in the Greco-Roman world adultery (*moiḥeyō*) was only a sin for married man if he slept with a married woman. To have relations with *any man* beside her husband was a sin for a woman (hence the reason the scribes and Pharisees only brought a woman to Jesus in John 8:1–12). Fundamentally, it treated a woman's sexual identity as exclusively her husband's property but as the "owner," a

man was not so restricted. Although never explicitly stated, the Jewish leaders seem to have accommodated this arrangement; and they certainly seemed to have allowed for a man to have sexual relations with non-Israelite women, since the prohibition only protected the rights of Jewish men.

Jesus's statement that a man could sin in lusting after a woman broke considerably with the thinking of the day. As an extension of his view of human relationships, Jesus took the marriage relationship to be a reflection of God's nature and violating it, even in theory or fantasy, was a mark of man's unrighteousness. Jesus adopts an authoritative posture by leading off with "I say to you," putting his own interpretation on par with (and ultimately exceeding) the interpretation of the rabbis.

- How would it change your behavior if you viewed every relationship and interaction with others as a reflection of God's nature and relationships?

- Sexual sin gets a lot of coverage in churches today, often being the most prominent issue discussed (especially when it comes to LGBTQIA+ discussions). Do you think this focus is warranted? How do you think the church (not Bedford Road specifically, but the church in general) is doing handling this issue, in comparison to how Jesus discusses these issues?

Tuesday, March 12

In his discussion of anger, Jesus addressed one of the ten commandments (Exod 20:13). Now he is addressing another (Exod 20:14). He is not systematically addressing the ten commandments, but these ten statements were foundational to the Jewish thinking about God and the Law. They are mentioned as "the ten words" (*ʿśeret had-barîm*) within the Torah (Exod 34:28; Deut 4:13; 10:4), and they serve as the root of the legal codes that follow them (Exod 21:1–23:19). They are mentioned repeatedly as being stored in the Ark of the Covenant (Deut 10:2; 1 Kgs 8:9; 2 Chr 5:10). That Jesus highlights only a few here does not indicate he did not address all of them in his teaching, but he does single a handful out for consideration.

In other gospels, Jesus extended the prohibition on adultery to include the casual divorces of his day (Mark 10:12; Luke 16:18). Just as the prohibition on murder elevates human life, the prohibition on adultery elevates human marriage. It is given a sacred status in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the apostle Paul elevates it almost to the divine (Eph 5:22–33).

- Jesus uses the ten commandments as a launching pad for fairly elaborate discussions. He applies them both in disproving other views and arguing for his own. How can we be sure we are not exceeding the mandate of the Scriptures when we apply them?

Wednesday, March 13

When discussing the lust of the eyes, Jesus is dealing with our imaginations. For the Jews, the imagination began with what one could see, but it is rooted in the heart. In Jewish thought, true adultery occurs in the heart, and that is the root of the Hebrew word *zīmah*, which literally means "hidden intent" or "something done in the dark" (see Prov 21:27). As one midrash on Numbers puts it, "It is called 'adultery' [*zīmah*] because both of them deny [their actions] and say, 'We did not commit a sin'" (*Num. Rab.* 9:1).

While it is not incorrect to read this passage as a warning about lust, Jesus seems to be getting at the point that adultery is a "hidden" thing that people try to get away with by saying they're *not* doing it. In other words, Jesus is speaking to the sin of denial as much as to the sin of adultery. He is perhaps drawing on the Proverbs, which is also cited in the Midrash (*Num. Rab.* 9:11–12) but here is provided without that commentary.

> There are six things that the Lord hates,
> seven that are an abomination to him:
> haughty eyes, a lying tongue,
> and hands that shed innocent blood,
> **a heart that devises wicked plans,** feet that make haste to run to evil,
> a false witness who breathes out lies,
> and one who sows discord among brothers. (Proverbs 6:16–18)

This passage is a series of triplets with a kicker at the end. In fact, you can see a parallel to Jesus's words on anger in the "haughty eyes…" triplet, and adultery in the "heart that devises…" section. There is a *procession from* perception to action to "cover up" and all result in discord and disunity among brothers.

- If sin indeed begins in the heart/eyes, what safeguards can we put in place to help us?

- These are sins which affect relationships. How can we employ relationships to safeguard against them?

Thursday, March 14

Often when discussing interpretation of Scripture, people will argue for a "literal reading" of the text. Usually "literal" means to interpret the Scriptures flatly, accept whatever is said as concrete. When Jesus talks about plucking out eyes and cutting off hands (vv. 29–30), he is using hyperbole to make a point. This is a good example of a situation where the most literal reading is not the most concrete. The most literal reading of this is *not* to advocate for self-mutilation, but rather to read these statements as figurative language. Jesus is exaggerating to make his point, and the meaning is encoded into the text, rather than being explicit (Llewelyn and Robinson, 2021: 430–33).

This is a fairly simple example of encoded meaning, but there is a great deal of it in Jesus's teachings. For example, when he says "take up my cross" (10:38, 16:24), he does not mean all believers will be crucified and the

apostles understood this (Gal 5:24, 6:14; Phil 3:10). When he calls us to "eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood" (John 6:53), he is not calling us to literal cannibalism. Both are idiomatic ways of describing our commitment to Christ as being complete. Encoded speech requires intelligent engagement, and this means that God has placed a certain amount of trust in you, as a believer, to interpret the Scriptures using your mind—guided by the Holy Spirit to be sure—but still fully engaged (2 Tim 2:15).

- Share a time when you or someone you were speaking with missed an encoded meaning in the Bible. How did you correct the mistake and encourage healthy reading and interpretation habits?

- Can you identify a Christian group (and this can be taken very loosely) who bases a particular belief on a misinterpretation of the text? What do you think we should do to ensure we are not adversely influenced by such things, which can often be subtle?

Friday, March 15

Divorce is such a significant part of our society that it is difficult to realize just how rare it was in the ancient world. Although there are some vague criteria provided in the Torah (Deut 24:1–4), very little was written about it, and there are no accounts of its implementation in the Hebrew Scriptures. The rabbinical views of divorce seem to have evolved under Greco-Roman hegemony, and by the time of the Mishnah (late 2nd century AD), interpretation was so influenced by Roman jurisprudence that it is difficult to reconstruct how divorce was handled during Jesus's time (Lapin, 2012: 134–35). We can say with certainty that the rabbis held that marriage among Jews was categorically different from Gentile marriage (*Gen. Rab.* 18.24). The blurring of the distinction had a lot to do with Jews losing their privileged status in the Roman Empire after the Bar Kôkba' Revolt (AD 132–36).

Jesus's position on divorce ignores the expansion of divorce in Judaism, and he returns to the idea that only sexual immorality (*porneia*; translating the Hebrew *'ervah*) was acceptable grounds for divorce. From Jesus's perspective, seeking justification for convenient divorce would be no different than committing adultery. It provides a veneer of righteousness on top of an unrighteous act. This is why he says it forces the woman to commit adultery. She has done nothing to disqualify herself from the marriage, and therefore there should be no divorce.

- When societal norms are at odds with biblical truth, how do you respond? What steps can you take to maintain righteousness for yourself and those with whom you are connected?

- Casual divorce is one example of a societal norm sometimes self-justified by Scripture. What other examples might exist in our present context?

"To Swear"
Matthew 5:33–37

Monday, March 18

Jesus introduces the discussion of oaths with the word "again" (*palin*), which indicates that this discussion is connected to the previous section on marriage and divorce. Just as marriage is a covenant, every commitment is a covenant and God takes covenants seriously. Here, Jesus appears to be discussing legal testimony and not just regular promises or truthfulness. In this respect, he is also drawing on circumstances similar to the idea of being "subject to the council" and required witnesses (vv 23–24). Just as divine justice and righteousness are not dictated by the legal decisions of a council, so truthfulness and commitments are not dictated by the oaths we take. The oath does not keep a man right; and a right man does not need an oath.

The underlying issue of the human condition that Jesus is addressing is our sinfulness. We *require* things like oaths and covenants because without them, we are tempted to violate what we promise to preserve. Human beings are inclined to do whatever is to their advantage. On the other hand, a covenant or a promise is about the other person, sacrificing your own convenience to provide something for them.

- Do you find that the more you honor your word, the easier it is to do so? Can trustworthiness become a habit?

- If you have dealt with someone who has broken a trust or a promise, how hard is it to develop trust with them again? Why is that?

Tuesday, March 19

We owe each other nothing more than truth. In a world obsessed with not hurting each other's feelings and making sure you toe the line of appropriateness, we are reminded that Jesus said we should be so truthful that it would be meaningless for us to swear we will do something. These oaths he is describing were contracts, agreements to pay something or do a job for someone.

As Jesus points out that such an oath has no power because you cannot actually back it up in any tangible way. Jesus cites Leviticus 19:12, which states that any oath must be an oath to YHWH. For his audience, such an oath was inviolate, but an oath taken to something on earth could be backed out of without being dishonest. Jesus argues that since God is over all things, swearing to anything was swearing to him.

According to the historian Josephus, this view was also held by the sect of the Essenes, and as a result, they were considered to be excellent adjudicators because they would speak only the truth (Jos. *Wars* 2.135). In their thinking, if you could not be trusted without an oath, then any oath you took was inherently unreliable. Oaths therefore were a sign of unreliability, not reliability.

- Is there a difference between being *truthful* and being *trustworthy?* If so, what is it?

- With the proliferation of digital media, it is easy to see the world as full of false perceptions and the line between the truth and fiction is sometimes blurry. How can you ensure you are relying on trustworthy sources?

Wednesday, March 20

Swearing by your head (v 36) was a way of circumventing the restrictions and legality of an oath. It was basically equivalent to saying, "I'm good for it" (*M. Sanh.* 3:2). You avoided taking an oath to God, and instead stood in your own witness. It was usually accompanied by a clever lie or careful language that would negate the promise if things didn't work out. In other words, it was how you created an "escape clause" for yourself.

Jesus's quote of Leviticus 19:12 may indicate that he is talking about the practice of making oaths you do not intend to keep and not swearing oaths in general. Creating loopholes was a common practice, and the Jewish rabbis eventually created a rule similar to Jesus's statement here, namely that all oaths were to God (*b. Šebu.* 35a–b). It seems Jesus was a bit ahead of his time.

- We all create loopholes for ourselves from time to time. We hope we don't need them, but we also don't quite trust situations at times. "Don't put all your eggs in one basket," as the proverb goes. Do you think this kind of thinking has been detrimental to institutions like marriage or church? What can be done?

- On the other hand, why do we safeguard against institutions and ideas like we do? Where does the distrust come from? Is there a way to overcome the untrustworthy nature of many institutions?

Thursday, March 21

In verse 37, the text really reads, "Let your words be 'yes, yes' [*nai nai*], 'no, no' [*ou, ou*]." This is a specific formulation that was a response to a request for an oath (*D. Eretz Z.* 5:1) Rabbi Elazar was credited with this teaching: "Saying 'no' can be an oath, and saying 'yes' can be an oath" (*b. Šebu.* 36a). Put another way, when asked for an oath, just responding yes or no should be sufficient. If your repetition is not good enough for people to trust you, you have failed to honor God in a way that others can see. Your character is your testimony.

There is a popular proverb credited to at least half a dozen people, and probably predates all of them. "Character is who you are when no one is looking." We might revise that to say that character is who you *decide to be* when no one is looking. All of us struggle to have our yes be yes and our no be no.

- Would you say you have a consistent, reliable character? If so, how do you maintain it? If not, what steps can you take to build disciplines and consistency into your character?

- Relate the narrative of any individual from the Bible who represents consistent trustworthiness. (It is easy to identify those who did not!)

Friday, March 22

We do well to remember that the only person who has ever completely fulfilled the ideals presented in the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus himself. As God incarnate, he presents us with the perfect human being, which both shows God to be trustworthy *and* demonstrates our inability to keep every aspect of the Law perfectly. It is in the ethical requirements of the Law that Christ's sufficiency meets our inadequacy.

Because they have similar audiences, one can read Hebrews and Matthew together. They are very Jewish in context, but focused on far more than just the Hebrew Scriptures and the Jews. In fact, Hebrews often provides us with the theology that supports the narrative of Matthew's gospel. In particular, Hebrews views Jesus as the fulfillment of all that exists in the Law and the Prophets: a better man, a better messenger, a better priest, a better sacrifice, etc.

- Today, consider what the author of Hebrews says about the humanity of Jesus in one of the following passages: Hebrews 1:1–14, 2:5–18, 4:14–5:10, 7:11–28.

- As you reflect upon your chosen passage, consider if there are not equivalents between the passage and what we have seen in Matthew 5 so far.

"To Owe"
Matthew 5:38–42

Monday, March 25

The *lex talionis* ("An eye for an eye") is one of the most often repeated commands in the Law (Exod 21:24; Lev 24:20; Deut 19:21), and it is also probably the commandment that Jesus most clearly seems to countermand. We need to understand that the purpose of this statement was to stem private vigilante justice. If there was not a legal standard for meeting out justice, people could make valuations on their own (Lev 19:17–18).

It is likely that Jesus is referencing a common listing of the assorted injuries—eye, cheek, and coat—that was current in the rabbinical discussions of the day (Basson, 2015: 155). Rabbinical literature discusses the context of vengeance and relates it to Micah 7:8, "Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love [*ḥesed*]." Judaism was divided on the application of the *lex talionis*. Some rabbis viewed vengeance as an evil. Consider how Mar b. Rabina would end his prayers: "May my soul be silent to them that curse me" (*b. Berakot* 17a). Others created complicated rules for retribution, generally reducing the actual vengeance to financial compensation (*y. Bab. Qamma* 8.1).

This kind of paradox was unacceptable to Jesus. He held that personal attacks should be addressed personally (see 18:15–20). Justice, on the other hand, was the *removal* of evil for the good of society. Vengeance is about retribution for a wrong, which in itself can be evil. This is why justice cannot be trusted to individuals but by some kind of governing authority. The *lex talionis* was meant to be justice, administered within the Law, but it had become something else.

- We have touched only briefly on the distinction between *justice* and *vengeance*. Take some time to develop thoughts on this subject. Explore the topic in Scripture and in conversation.

- Is there a difference between *offense* and *oppression*? If there are differences, how do we tell which is which (especially given the controversies of our day concerning both), and how do we respond to them?

Tuesday, March 26

It is only after Jesus starts to develop this section that we see his focus resolving not on personal affronts, but resistance to Roman authority. The discussions of being struck on the cheek (v 39) and walking a mile (v 41) in particular are dealing with the authority the Romans had over the Jews. The particular word that is translated as

"resist" in verse 39 had a long history of referring to armed resistance (Davis, 2005: 7–36, 107). This kind of armed resistance would ultimately be the downfall of Judean Judaism when they rose up against the Romans and were mercilessly crushed in the First Jewish War (AD 64–77) and resulted in the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. Historically, this was the period in which the Church became *truly* distinct from Judaism because Christians refused to join in the revolt or ally with the Romans, drawing the ire of both groups. Early Christian sources describe the decision to leave Jerusalem and Judea as "the flight to Pella." Whether the Christians actually made this flight is debated, but the narrative makes clear why the Christians chose not to remain (Bourgel, 2010: 107–38; Houwelingen, 2003: 181–200).

Time and again, the New Testament reminds believers that their calling is not to resist the world order and set up a nation but to live in the world, preaching the gospel and transforming it as salt and light do. While Judean Judaism held stubbornly to a sort of "Hebrew nationalism," the Church was trans-national, made up of Jews and Gentiles. There was no national identity for the Christians to preserve in this period. It was only after the Christianization of the Roman Empire and the development of the idea of "Christendom" in the Middle Ages that Christianity became united with authority and government, a situation that persisted well into the modern era.

- How has "Christendom" (Christianity as part of government and political identity) affected our perspective on our role in the world?

- In an increasingly post-Christian world where institutions are stripping out vestiges of 'Christendom' (often excessively), how can we alter our perspective and approach to the world to be effective agents of the gospel?

Wednesday, March 27

Verse 40 deals with someone stealing *everything* from you through legal means. This is the definition of a institutionalized injustice. The Law actually guaranteed that you couldn't take everything from someone. You had to *at least* leave them their cloak (Exod 22:26–27; Deut 24:12–13). The Law provides for fairness, so weaponizing it as a means of oppression would be the height of disregard for YHWH. Jesus's response? Give them everything.

This is the highest form of protest, submission to injustice. And it is personified in Jesus (Acts 8:32–33; cf. Isa 53:7–8; 1 Pet 3:18). Even the divine Law can be used for evil, so we cannot seek to find hope in the Law. Again, we see Jesus contrasting the powers of the world (in this case, those operating within the legal system) with his Kingdom. It is not that we are powerless to act, but that we have the power to react and choose not to. We are free to allow injustice to stand that others might see it and seek true justice.

- We have a deeply seated need for justice, and things are not dealt with properly (in our eyes), we often will fight to fix the situation. How do we know when to stand and fight and when to endure?

- Many have taken Jesus's endurance of injustice as a normative practice, adopting pacifism at a level in which they will never respond to violence. Does this accurately reflect Jesus's teaching? Why or why not?

Thursday, March 28

The discussion of being forced to walk a mile is the only piece of this discussion (vv. 38–42) that does not have any precedent in the Torah. This is because it was a matter of Roman law, not Jewish practice. A Roman soldier could force a non-citizen to carry his pack and shield for a mile (cf. Luke 3:14). This was a necessity for the soldiers, who carried significant weight and had to sometimes march 20 miles in a day, and the practice actually dated back to the Persian Empire (Hatch, 1889: 37–38).

Originally, using people along the way helped keep the soldier fresh to fight, and so it was considered a fair trade if those he was defending helped carry the burden. By Jesus's day, however, the system was being abused in many places. Later in Roman history, it would be used as a sort of "imminent domain," allowing the imperial forces to seize property and it would eventually have to be curbed by the emperor Theodosius (*Cod. Theo.* 8.5).

Incidentally, the same verb used here for "forces" (or better "compels") is also used to describe the moment when Simon of Cyrene was compelled to carry Jesus's cross (27:32). Tradition holds that Simon became a believer, and his sons became leaders in the early church (Mark 15:21; Rom 16:13). Jesus will elsewhere tell his disciples to "take up your cross" (10:38; 16:24). The believer should not have to be compelled or forced to take up Christ's burden.

- We all have things we do begrudgingly because we "have to." What is your "extra mile" for someone? Are you capable of taking up the burden for the extra mile without an expectation from the other person?

- Take a few minutes to consider Matthew 25:31–46 where Jesus discusses serving "the least of these." Can we think of the oppressive forces in our world (like the Roman soldiers were for people of Jesus's day) as "the least of these"? The most undeserving require the greatest grace. How would this influence the way you act toward others.

Friday, March 29

Jesus's point in this discussion is that integrity, real internal strength, is more important than the oaths we take or the obligations we are placed under. While it is easy to read this as an ethical code, there is an underlying theology concerning God's unchanging nature. Religious leaders of the day were essentially arguing that God

had become distant, was unreachable, and so were instituting their own standards and their own traditions to bridge the gap to God. Among many of them, they were teaching that the "faithful" were obligated to resist their Gentile oppressors.

What was novel about Jesus's approach was how he established a precedent for his own incarnation and atonement. By turning popular interpretations on their heads and illustrating shortcomings, he opened the door to the idea that the gospel would not be a "change" in God's agenda but rather the unexpected completion of it, emerging from inside "the world" as Jews and Gentiles alike came under Jesus's authority rather than coming from outside of it as a ruling elite or legalistic religious identity. God is consistent. It is just our perceptions of his revelation and work that are flawed, and our flaws which lead to misinterpretation and misapplication.

- As you prepare to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus this weekend, take a few minutes to reflect on the journey of the past seven weeks. What insights have you drawn from these discussions? Are there things you hadn't thought about? Things that you did not agree with, or perhaps just found uncomfortable to consider?

- How will you implement what you have seen/are considering? In the second week, we discussed being salt and light—influencing our world for Jesus. Have you had any changes to your thinking about how to do that?

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