Part 2

“Love Your Enemies”
Matthew 5:43–48

Monday, April 1

Who is my neighbor (*plēsion*)? Who is my enemy (*eḥthros*)? Jesus’s teaching on loving your neighbor (19:19, 22:34–40; cf. Lev 19:18) is repeated by the apostles (Rom 13:9; Gal 5:14; James 2:8). It may be called one of his characteristic positions, and yet here Jesus redefines the idea of a neighbor and an enemy, blurring the line between them. In fact, neighbor and enemy are defined not by God but by us. We choose to treat one person one way and another person another way. Even the enemies of Christ are given opportunities to draw near to him (Rom 5:10; Phil 3:18).

Jewish sectarian literature is particular revealing on the subject of enemies. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, there are a number of commentaries that encourage one to love those within the sect and hate the outsiders. Take for example, this passage from “The Rule of the Community” (*serek hayad*):

> “In order to welcome all those who freely volunteer to carry out God’s decrees into the covenant of kindness; in order to be united in the counsel of God and walk in perfection in his sight; in order to love all the sons of light, each one according to his lot in God’s plan, and to detest all the sons of darkness, each one in accordance with his guilt in God’s vindication” (1QS 1:7–11 from Martínez 1999: 71).

Another fragment (4Q525, frag. 10) makes a distinction between “the enemy” (Heb. *ʾôyeb*) and “the loved” (*ʾâhab*). These two words look very similar in Hebrew, especially when written the way they appear in the fragment (אויב and אוהב). For the sectarians, the distinction must be made carefully. Certainly, the Hebrew Scriptures called for the faithful to reject idolatry and paganism, but the idea of “detesting” those outside the sect (“the sons of darkness”) goes beyond rejecting sin and those who follow it. The rest of the Rule makes it quite plain that only a special, chosen few were worthy of true kindness.

- What are some reasons that we choose to consider someone a neighbor? What about an enemy?

- Why do you think that when people become sectarian or cliquish, they tend to become more likely to identify “outsiders” as hostile?

Tuesday, April 2

Jesus specifically refers to his audience as "sons of the heavenly Father" (v 45), language which seems to answer the labels like "the sons of light" (see yesterday's discussion) and other such titles used by Jewish sects of the time. A "son of the heavenly Father" loves his enemies. He does not simply tolerate them, but loves them. The apostle John later argues that you cannot love God if you do not love others (1 John 4:20).

Even the Jews who were not part of a sect still viewed the Roman power as "the enemy" and that included anyone who worked for them. This may have had a particular poignance for Matthew, who was trained as a tax farmer (10:3) and therefore was part of the Roman machine. What we often do not think about is that the early church was composed of "natural enemies." Jews and Gentiles, Greeks and barbarians, free men and slaves, were being drawn together, and this required the suspension of hostility and division (Eph 2:14–15). It was not "normal" or easy for these groups, which had always seen themselves as distinct, to grow into something new.

- Tell of a time when God led you to see someone who was "outside" of your comfort zone as someone God loves. What challenges exist in accepting those who God has accepted?

- Who might be the modern day "Romans" that you tend to see as outsiders or enemies?

Wednesday, April 3

The sun rises. Rains fall. The sun breaks through the clouds. Every person experiences these natural phenomena. It is not like the righteous experience these things while the wicked live in gloom and darkness. This kind of contrast makes good fiction (Mordor from *Lord of the Rings*, anyone?) but they are not expressed in reality. In reality, a wicked man enjoys exactly the same climactic conditions that a righteous man does. If the rest of God's creation does not treat people differently based on perception of enmity, why should we?

Going all the way back to the beginning of the sermon, Jesus argues that people must see our good works (5:16). These must be good works directed toward our enemies. No one would watch someone being kind to a friend while ignoring needs among their enemies and think they should glorify the Father. This is why Jesus introduces this "essential paradox" of loving your enemies. There is something greater than our own feelings or comfort at play here, as loving your enemies reflects the true character of the Creator God (France, 2007: 251). Love is much bigger than emotion. It is a loyalty to truth, even with those who we might consider enemies. This means both compassion and chastening, both generous tolerance and bold truth.

- Are there contemporary situations in which the Church has "dropped the ball" in terms of loving our enemies? Discuss some of these situations and how we might have handled them better.

- The kind of love Jesus is preaching is much bigger than our society's definition of love. How can we live this out in practical terms with those who see us as their enemies?

Thursday, April 4

Jesus makes the point that it is not a big deal to just "greet the brothers" (v 47), another possible reference to sectarians in Jewish society who viewed themselves as an exclusive brotherhood. Is it enough to be generous and hospitable to those who consider "like us"? The ever-expanding sphere of salvation requires that we be conscious of expanding our concept of fellowship. This fellowship, this shared experience is extended to our very enemies. Even enemies are invited into the salvation of Christ and the unity that results.

It is not the action of greeting but the *object*. It is easy to love the ones you already love. It is the action of loving the unlovable that is personified in Christ. We feel perfectly justified in treating our enemies as somehow less than deserving of our compassion and generosity, but again Jesus entered a world that was, on the whole, hostile to him (John 1:11–12). This hostility provides much of the framing narrative of all four gospels, with Jesus being rejected and treated as an enemy for a multitude of reasons. Through it all, Jesus continues to include those who consider him as enemies within his audience. He challenges their suppositions and biases, debates their theology, and in the end, still offered himself up to them in the belief that his death and resurrection would offer redemption to those who were willing to kill him (Luke 23:34).

- All humans have a way of delineating between friends and enemies, although we all draw the line differently. From your perspective, what makes overcoming the line between friend and enemy so difficult?

- Tell of a time when you had a hostile or contentious relationship that you discovered was founded not on reality but on perceptions and misunderstanding. How did you resolve this issue? If you have not yet resolved it, why does it linger?

Friday, April 5

Throughout the arguments, Jesus has been attempting to correct what Jeffrey Gibbs once described as Judaism's "twisted fruit" grown through a "misuse of the canonical soil" (Gibbs, 2006: 306). Jesus concludes his discussion with an indirect quote from God's covenant with Abraham (Gen 17:1) that summarizes not only the specific section, but the entire antithetical argument Jesus has made (5:21–48). In a climate where armed revolt was an option that was on the table, Jesus promotes a divine standard of perfection that exceeds the need to "right the wrongs" done by the perceived enemies.

"In Matthew, the concept of a higher righteousness is connected with sayings about *fulfilling* the law, not abolishing it (5:17–19). With only one exception, the antitheses do not reject the law, but only the way the law is usually interpreted" (Furnish, 1972: 48). The Pharisaical interpretation of enemies seems to have followed the sectarian view. They, whether political rivals or personal adversaries, were enemies and therefore worthy of our disdain. If they were enemies of your particular sect, they must be enemies of God. Jesus, on the other hand,

adopts a view that is expressed in the Proverbs, which belonged to the "Writings," the last of the three sections of the Hebrew Scriptures.

> *Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles, lest YHWH see it and be displeased, and turn away his anger from him.* (*Prov 24:17*)
>
> *If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink, for you will heap burning coals on his head, and YHWH will reward you.* (*Prov 25:17*)

Notice that neither of these passages remove the guilt that an enemy might have by virtue of his actions, but it removes the responsibility of dealing with this guilt from you and places it in God's hands. For a believer to treat an enemy with disdain or hatred is to become an enemy of God yourself.

- We might sometimes feel justified in disdaining and mistreating those who mistreat or abuse us. This is a slippery slope. What more serious situations are opened up once we begin to view someone of worth of our disdain?

- Can you disagree with someone without disdaining or disrespecting them? How do you safeguard against slipping into condescension and disdain?

"Public Righteousness" Matthew 6:1–6

Monday, April 8

In the previous section, Jesus dealt with the teachings of the Judaism of his day and how they fell short of God's righteousness. Here, he turns his attention to the public performance of righteousness, in particular alms-giving and prayer. These are what we might call "abundance" acts. People give alms to the poor out of their bounty; and public prayer is usually something done by people with prestige and a reputation for good speech and devout behavior.

It is tempting to view the public performance of righteousness as equivalent to righteousness. It looks good, so it must be good, right? Given that God's affirmation of our righteousness is immaterial and spiritual, who would not be tempted by the applause of other people who are pursuing righteousness? This is why Jesus tells his disciples they have to "beware" (*proseḥō*) or, perhaps more accurately, "turn your mind to awareness" of their motivations behind their good works (Morris, 1992: 136). While our good works are a light by which others can

see the Father, they can also be reflective of an attitude of self-idolatry. In the end, defining righteousness solely by the public acts of worship is no different than Aaron declaring a golden calf to be YHWH (Exod 32:4–5).

- Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you were more focused on the external appearance rather than internal reality? How did you go about fixing the situation?

- Why do you think people tend to be so willing to accept the external, public rather than exploring what is really going on?

Tuesday, April 9

We have all seen them. The internet is filled with the viral videos of people surprising some homeless person with a wad of cash or doing some other good work. These videos get shared hundreds of thousands of times, and on the surface they seem to be about getting people to do stuff for others. What most of us don't realize is that those views translate immediately into cash for the influencer who owns the channel. For an investment of a few hundred dollars, he or she might make thousands in ad revenue. In other words, the public act of righteousness is a way to build one's own personal wealth.

In Jesus's day, there was no structure within Judaism for structured care for the poor (Luz, 2007: 299). Almsgiving was largely left to the individual, and so it was not uncommon for the wealthy members of the Jewish ruling class to be sure that they advertised the way they provided for the poor. There is no evidence that they blasted real trumpets, and it may be that Jesus is speaking idiomatically of some kind of loud public proclamations, self-advertising that attracted attention. The end result was the same. Others who viewed this rabbi or that lawyer as being particularly righteous would be more inclined to patronize them.

The underlying motivation was *not* compassion for the poor but rather advertising one's piety and promoting the perception of compassion among others. Throughout Scripture, there is this idea that true holiness is not always immediately recognizable. Thus, Moses had a speech impediment and yet became the lawgiver. David was not even included in the candidates for king, and yet would become a man after God's own heart.

- Looking at the religious landscape of our world, it does not take much to see people doing the "right thing" for the wrong reasons. How can we personally safeguard our thinking to minimize the wrong priorities?

- It is hard to get a hearing without a little branding and advertising. How does the church strike the balance of being visible without becoming consumed with branding and self-promotion?

Wednesday, April 10

The "you" in this passage is singular, meaning that this passage is dealing with the behavior of individual believers and not the church as a collective group. Each individual is responsible for his or her own heart condition. Whether we are with other believers or not, there is accountability to the Father in heaven (vv 1, 4, 6, 16).

It is worth noting that while Jesus makes it clear that there is a *difference* between the scribes/pharisees and his followers, their practices are very much the same (Sim, 2000: 200–1). Each individual believer was still commanded to give alms and pray, but Jesus makes a strong distinction based on motivation because this is not a community activity but an individual one. A believer can have the right motivations for an action, even when they are in the midst of others who have the wrong motivations.

- This point speaks to the presence of true believers in denominations or churches which may have correct motivation or beliefs. Do you believe a true believer can remain in a group that has obvious errors and still be right with God? Why or why not?

- We can overplay the idea of individual responsibility. Some groups have used personal guilt as a tool for manipulating people. At the same time, we are individually responsible for our actions and the motivations that underly them. What passages of Scripture speak to the balance of individual accountability?

Thursday, April 11

There are a handful of interpretations of Jesus's statement about your left hand not knowing what your right hand is doing. Some believe that it is tied to an ancient figure of speech for a friend, in the sense that it is a private, intimate knowledge. Only you know what you're doing. Others, however, maintain that the idea was to give with one hand because you could do that discreetly while giving with both hands would be considered a formal offering (Gundry, 1982: 102–3).

One of the less discussed aspects of this level of privacy is that it removes our need to know whether the person we are helping is "worth" helping. All of us have, at some time, encountered someone in need who we felt did not deserve to be helped. It could be because of their lifestyle or their attitude or any number of other factors, but we look at a person in need and worry about what they might do with what we give them or the impression others might have if we helped "their kind" of person.

- Has there been a time in your life when you were the person in need who people refused to help? If so, how did it feel?

- What steps can you take in your life to ensure that your "left hand does not know what your right hand is doing" in your helping others?

Friday, April 12

If we are helping people in secret where only God can see it, how will others see our "good works" and glorify him (5:16)? Isn't this a paradox? It depends how you define "good works." We tend to think of "good works" as a list of moral behaviors, things that get noticed as being "good." In the Judaism of Jesus's day, this was certainly true. The Pharisees in particular could provide a lengthy list of "good works" that one did as a fulfillment of Torah. This is not, however what Jesus had in mind.

This kind of thinking about "good works" operates within an honor/shame way of thinking. "Good works" bring honor to us, while inactivity brings shame. Therefore, the believer heaps up honor by performing "good works." It makes sense in our modern world, just as it did in the ancient one (Waetgen, 2017: 87).

It is useful to think of "good works" in a different way. The word "works" means actions or movement. It is not a prescribed list of activities but rather those actions which reflect the heart of God in us. They are therefore varied, ranging from something easy to understand like charity to something far more complex like friendship or promoting unity among the Church. Since they would be in alignment with God, and not man, good works might also include correction of sin, reproving of error, and even the rejection of accepted "Christian" behaviors or ideas which are not in keeping with Scripture.

- How does changing "good works" to "actions that reflect the heart of God" alter your perspective on Christian conduct?

- The temptation to define righteousness and holiness as a cumulative total of "good works" is strong. What steps can we take in our relationships with others to ensure that our "good works" are not the primary criteria for evaluating our worth as believers?

"The Lord's Prayer"
Matthew 6:5–15

Monday, April 15

The previous section has a very simply structure, contrasting the hypocrisy of outward righteousness with internal righteous, but this is interrupted here by an extended discussion of prayer that seems so out of place that some commentators insist (incorrectly, in my opinion) that it must be a later addition to the text (Davies and Allison, 1988: 574–76; Hagner, 2000: 137–38). Rather than being a late addition, this section is the center of Jesus's sermon. He has been working his way deeper into the thinking of his audience, questioning core behaviors and attitudes. Here, he gets to the fundamental concept of righteousness—one's relationship to God.

One can *appear* to be righteous to others by doing the right things at the right times, but there is no faking the true communication with God. This is the "secret" which Jesus has repeated. God sees and hears the innermost attitudes of the individual. How we pray says a lot about how we see ourselves in relationship to our God. Consider the two actions that appear before this passage (almsgiving) and after it (fasting). When giving alms, one is giving of what we possess. When fasting, one is denying reception of something we might need. Outflow and inflow—but they must pass through you, the person. How do you sustain yourself? The Word of God becomes fundamental to the flow of God's grace to both others and ourselves (4:4), and we hear the Word of God in prayer.

- Why does Jesus make such a big deal about God "seeing in secret"? Are there times when the visibility of our actions are important for glorifying God?

- As you read the Lord's Prayer, what sections stand out to you? Are there components of it that have had different significance to you at different times? Why do you think that might be?

Tuesday, April 16

The passage we call "the Lord's Prayer" was probably something Jesus repeated often and so was very familiar to the disciples in a few variations (Carson, 1984: 168). It appears in two completely different contexts in the gospels. Like all of Jesus's words, the original was likely in Aramaic or an Aramaized dialect of Hebrew, as spoken in Galilee. There is even a word (*epiousios*, "daily") that ancient authors could not find used anywhere else in Greek literature. It is perhaps a translation of the Aramaic *missathi* ("bread sufficient for me"), which appears in some Aramaic discussions of Proverbs 30:8, "feed me with the bread that is needful (or necessary) for me" (Black, 1954: 203–5).

Living the life of an itinerant rabbi, Jesus was depending upon the largesse of others. Mark hints that there was a group of Galilean women who essentially financed Jesus's ministry (Mark 15:41). Even in his death, these women were the ones who went to the tomb to prepare his body and so heard of his resurrection. Those who took care of his needs did so because God had provided them with the means to do so, and he took that divine role very seriously. Jesus was provided for, but he was careful to organize his prayer as thankful to God for providing this sustenance.

- Do you find yourself forgetting that all provision is from God? How can you express gratitude to those God has used to provide, even if you have a distaste for them (for example, a boss you don't care for)?

- In the case of the Lord's Prayer, the language Jesus uses is less important than the principle he teaches. Do you find that the principle of "daily bread" has many ways to express it? What is your "go to" way of expressing thanks for the food/sustenance God provides?

Wednesday, April 17

It is easy to misunderstand Jesus's reference to "empty phrases" (or "vain repetition" in the KJV) in verse 7. The Greek word is *battalogeō,* and it is a rare case of a hybrid of the Aramaic *bṭlh'* (literally "emptiness") with the Greek *logeō* ("to speak"). It is likely that in translating Jesus's original words, Matthew chose not to use the common Greek word *barbaros* (which we get "barbarian" from) because that term had an implied xenophobic, condescending meaning (cf. 1 Cor 14:11). In its place, Matthew refers instead to meaningless words, or prayers that have no weight. It is not their repetition that makes them worthless. The prayers are empty because they are aimed at the wrong gods, and they seek the "reward" of an answer rather than being focused on the God to whom they should be addressed. In short, they are prayers devoid of true worship because those who pray them believe the words themselves have magical power or influence on the supernatural (Quarles, 2011: 183–84).

Although his gospel comes from a Jewish perspective, Matthew is careful not to exclude the Gentile "barbarians" from true worship. It is not the Jewish prayers that are good and godly, but prayers that are filled with meaning and worship. Jewish prayers can be just as filled with "magic" words and attempts to manipulate the divine as Gentile prayers can be. Jesus addresses the mindset, and he opens the door of prayer to anyone who prays earnestly and worshipfully.

- 1 Timothy 2:1–4 offers four types of prayer: supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings. Prayers and thanksgivings are fairly self-explanatory. Supplication is a request for God to do or provide something. Intercessions are asking God to remove a problem or situation. Consider your own prayer life. Do you tend to focus on one particular category of prayer? How can you balance your prayer life across those four categories?

- Is there someone you pray with regularly? Not everyone is comfortable praying in groups, and that is ok. If you are one who prays alone most often, do you have someone you discuss prayer with regularly? Or have agreed to pray for one another?

Thursday, April 18

Have you ever noticed that the entirety of the Lord's Prayer is in the imperative? There is not a single subjective petition. It is not, "If you will give us this day our daily bread." The text speaks confidently of God's provision as Lord. "Give us this day our daily bread." It is a foregone conclusion that God will provide what we need, not because we ask but because he is God indeed. Likewise, it is not "we hope we can stay away from temptation," but rather, "Lead us not into temptation." If we are trusting him to lead, it is true that we will be tempted but we are given the capacity to overcome, and endure. Our deliverance is assured when our faith is fully in Him.

For Jesus, prayer is not an appeal to a distant God for some kind of special treatment. It is a recognition of the revealed nature of God. As a God who revealed himself and honors the covenants he makes with his people, God does not expect us to *beg* him for things which he has promised. Still, we are reminded that as a God of

covenants, God expects us to be as charitable and compassionate as he is. This means our prayers are not only for our daily bread but also for the strength to release any sentiments of vindictiveness or entitlement we might have toward other people. It is God's will to provide us with our daily bread, but also for us to forgive our debtors.

- How do you pray for God's provision ("daily bread") in your life? How often do you pray for provision as compared to forgiveness and your attitude toward others?

- Like any relationship, prayer is about balance. Consider adding the element of silence to your prayer life. After making a request or expressing thanks or interceding for someone, sit in silence before God. You're not necessarily listening or anything, just being still (Ps 37:7; 46:10).

Friday, April 19

The reciprocity in verses 14–15 indicates our own attitude toward prayer, not the nature of God. How can we possibly pray sincerely for God's forgiveness when we don't understand forgiveness enough to live it out in our lives. Forgiveness of wrongs is *always* within our power, because forgiveness is a choice we make. Unforgiveness and holding on to wrongs is also a choice we make. Both letting go and clinging tightly are choices we make and can unmake. It is a bit of a paradox, but we cannot truly understand what we are asking God to do in our lives until we are willing to do it in our own.

When I was a child, my parents would make me and my sisters apologize to one another if we did something to them. Often the apology was mumbled or presented without true sincerity. When that happened, my father would ask me, "What are you sorry for?" It was only when we spoke the offense that it became real and we could truly ask forgiveness or forgive. In a similar sense, when we articulate what we are forgiving others for, we often illuminate what we also need forgiven. Unforgiveness is almost always tied to our inability to see and speak the offense. In our minds, it is too embarrassing or too hurtful. But one of the underlying themes of the Sermon on the Mount is a wholeness of being and action (Pennington, 2017: 185). How can we receive forgiveness if we do not practice it so we understand it?

- Do you have an area of unforgiveness in your life? If you honestly evaluate how you have handled that situation, has the unforgiveness had an adverse effect on your life?

- Have you ever experienced forgiveness from another person that was so honest and sincere as to leave a mark on your thinking? Describe how it has impacted you.

"Fasting"
Matthew 6:16–18

Monday, April 22

Hypocritical fasting is something that was condemned long before Jesus preached this sermon (Isa 58:1–12; Joel 2:12–17). Because fasting is something that isn't necessarily visible, the Jews would practice something we might call "praise-fishing," dropping hints for others to notice one's piety. It was not enough to fast, which God would see, but they must also be *seen* or *known* to be fasting. As with the other practices in this passage (almsgiving and prayer), there was a tendency toward observing outward behavior as equivalent to inward righteousness.

Why do people do this? Because they know they will get attention. We tend to look around for others who are doing praiseworthy things. People "praise-fish" because we are biting. Helping our brothers and sisters *not* do things for applause begins with us not looking to praise people for appearances. "Extraordinary" acts of obedience and service should be ordinary for the believer, whether it is noticed or not.

- Have you ever found yourself "praise-fishing"? If so, have you ever had someone call you out on it? How did that go?

- It has been said that "character is who you are in the dark." How do you become the same follower of Christ whether you are being seen or not?

Tuesday, April 23

The particular type of fasting being described here was probably fasting of lamentation. The people fasting would "disfigure" their faces so they were obviously lamenting. The Greek word is *skuthrōpoi*, literally "darkened appearance." Public lament was very common in STJ, and it seems likely that "disfigure" would be more appropriately be translated as "hide" since the Greek word (ἀφανίζω) is the opposite of "appear" or "be visible." In other words, these people were making their "hidden" faces very obvious to everyone, brooding and advertising their piety.

Jesus continues to criticize this kind of public piety because it has so many manifestations. He implies that this kind of thing is superficial and it does not reflect the actual spiritual condition of the people acting them out. He is not condemning public acts of lament. Jesus engages in these himself (Matt 11:21; 23:13). The issue at hand is the lamentation to be noticed. In order to draw attention to their lament, they act in a way that draws attention to themselves rather than that which they are lamenting.

- Where do you believe *genuine lament* comes from? What is its purpose? How is it different from lament or emotional display for affection?

Wednesday, April 24

It is not often that we find Jesus fasting, probably because he was so careful not to make it obvious. He does, however, express a form of fast at the Lord's Table when he tells the disciples he will not drink of the cup again until he returns (26:26–29; cf. Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:18–20). In that situation, Jesus's fast is one of expectation rather than lament. He looks forward to their reunion with the faithful. While we cannot be certain, he may have had in mind passages like Isaiah 25:6–9 and 55:1–2.

> *On this mountain YHWH of the hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is YHWH; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."* (Isa 25:6–9)

> *"Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food."* (Isa 55:1–2)

In this case, the abstinence Jesus expresses is meant to represent eager anticipation. Such fasting was quite common in the ancient world, where rich foods were often only enjoyed at the harvest. This is why the great feasts of the Torah always include massive meals. Yom Kippur was actually the only day where fasting was commanded (Lev 16:29–31; 23:27–32; Num 29:7). For most of the year, people ate enough to sustain themselves. At the harvests, however, they drank and ate and partied. It was not gluttony but celebration of God's goodness.

- Have you ever tried fasting as an anticipation of something that is coming soon? As a discipline of preparation?

- If not, consider trying it at some point. Perhaps it is something small or something big.

Thursday, April 25

Following on yesterday's discussion, fasting was a much more familiar thing in the ancient world than it is today. Pretty much everywhere in the Roman world, bread was about 70% of people's caloric intake. It was eaten with olive oil, and was accompanied by a fish or something like that (14:17). Things like fruit were considered a treat, but they were seasonal and if the trees were not tended, they did not yield fruit (21:18–22). We often think of the Roman era as a time of excess and feasting, but that was only for a very small elite. The modern American would be surprised by how small and unvaried meals were for most people. We would be out of place indeed in a world where barley is considered a tasty road trip treat (Luke 6:1).

What is a fad diet today (intermittent fasting) was a necessary reality for people in Jesus's day. Therefore fasting was not meant to be a denial of luxury or pleasure, but of necessity. The practice was generally connected to (1) mourning, (2) a component of prayer, or (3) in preparation for an encounter of some kind (Lambert, 2007: 478). It served a key function of focusing attention on the spiritual realm, perhaps a means of obtaining clarity in a confusing situation. The fast was not a spiritual ends to itself, but the temporary surrender of a physical necessity for a greater spiritual truth.

- While food is the most common type of fast, it is not the only thing that we can fast from. What other types of fasts might you consider valuable as a part of helping you focus on spiritual things?

- Like fasting, there are practices in our world that become advertised "image" matters rather than spiritual disciplines. The one that comes to mind is worship music, which often is more about the performance than the divine object. How can the Church better focus on encountering the divine rather than the "appearance" of the acts?

Friday, April 26

Jesus tells his listeners to "anoint your head and wash your face" (6:17). This is contrasted with disfiguring your faith and publicly declaring your fasting. Instead, you should go about your regular everyday habits. Wash your face. Brush your hair. Do not hint that you're doing anything differently. The fast is made a "secret" thing because not everything about our relationship with God is public. The private spiritual devotion should run much deeper and stronger than that which is seen in public. Jesus does not ban fasting. As D. A. Carson puts it, "The solution is not to abolish fasting but to set it within a biblical framework and sincerely to covet God's blessing" (Carson, 1984: 176).

- Should the believer be concerned about their "Sunday best"? Is there spiritual merit to the attitude of making a clear, visible distinction between "worship" and other days?

- Again, we have to ask how others will see our "good works and glorify your father in heaven" if we make everything secret. How do we balance the visible and invisible aspects of spiritual devotion?

"Fear & Anxiety"
Matthew 6:19–43

Monday, April 29

Although Jesus uses physical treasure as his touchpoint in this part of the sermon, he is speaking about the idea of accumulating spiritual value or equity. He appears to be interpreting and applying a principle from Proverbs (Prov 10:2, 11:4). We may actually have indications of the influence of Jesus's parable in the life of Monobazus II, a first century AD king of Adiabene (a small kingdom in Mesopotamia under the Parthian empire). According to ancient sources, his family had converted to Judaism around AD 30 (Jos. *Ant.* 20.95–96). References to this Jewish monarchy are scant, but their faith has some peculiarities. Like the Christians in Antioch, his mother contributed aid when Jerusalem was in famine (Acts 11:27–30). There are also hints that she took the "Nazirite" vow (*m. Nazir.* 19b.8). In the Talmud, Monobazus seems to present his own life in terms similar to Jesus's teaching here in Matthew 6.

> "My ancestors stored on earth and I stored in heaven…I stored away in a place where no other could reach it…My ancestors stored in this world and I stored for the world to come." (*y. Pe'ah* 1:1 [Basser, 2009: 183])

The Talmud reports Monozabus's words as if they are extraordinary and unusual. Although only appearing in Jewish sources, this may hint at the influence of Jesus's teachings not just in the Levant but even as far away as the Parthian empire. When Luke presents the same material to a Gentile audience, he presents it in a much more Gentile context (Luke 12:19–21) showing how this particular articulation would have resonated with Matthew's Jewish audience. It also demonstrates that Jesus seems to have been pointing out the errors of the religious elite, who attempted to accumulate both physical and spiritual treasures here on earth.

- All us find ourselves focused on this idea of accumulating "rewards" and "treasures" here on earth. It feels good when others notice our works. Are there ways to praise goodness and righteousness here without it being about the accumulation of "treasure"?

- What are some healthy forms of affirmation we can employ as we observe others growing in their faith? What checks can we be adding to our thinking to avoid the traps the religious leaders had fallen into.

Tuesday, April 30

Notice how Jesus moves from the heart (21) to the eye (22). He had drawn a similar line in 5:27–30 speaking about lust and adultery. In a very real sense, lust and greed come from the same motivations or desires. Lust is the accumulation of *people* and sensual desire for one's self, while greed is the accumulation of wealth and the financial desire to enrich yourself. The eye is supposed to be the light of the body, letting in a vision of the world as it is, rather than as we wish it to be. If we are blinded or darkened by desire and greed, then we are truly in the dark.

Jesus contrasts a healthy (*haplous*) eye with a wicked or evil (*ponēros*) eye. While "healthy" is a reasonable translation, the word *haplous* comes from the idea of a singleness of character. The surface is the same as the underlying matter. In other words, Jesus is arguing against ulterior motives and hidden agendas. The citizen of the kingdom does not look at a task and try to figure out what value it might have to him. He values the works of God because they are the works of God, without seeking a "side hustle." The issue is not what the eye *sees*, but rather what the eye allows us to *want* secretly from what we see.

- Tell of an encounter you have had with someone who had an ulterior motive. Is it ever a pleasant experience?

- How can we discipline ourselves to have healthy (or sincere) eyes when it comes to the works of the Kingdom?

Wednesday, May 1

In Numbers 15:39–40, God warned Israel about the dangers of "following your heart." In fact, it is put in no uncertain terms. They are warned "not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which are inclined to whore after." The Hebrew word translated here as "whore after" (*znh*) is unequivocal. Idolatry and sin are the end result of following our hearts without tempering and testing our desires against the word of God. Jesus even refers to the eye in this passage (22–23), indicating he had this Numbers passage in mind when he presented this teaching.

Treasures in this world are too easily lost (corrupted, stolen). On top of that, the standard of what is "enough" is always changing. We all know there is the danger of "market loss," what might be equivalent to what Jesus says about moths and vermin. Do you know why you had to use 1" margins all the way around your papers in school? It comes from the practice of wide margins in old manuscripts. It was assumed that animals would consume the outer edges of the books while they were being stored. Printing the text with a wide margin was a safeguard against the exact kind of loss Jesus is talking about here. Heavenly riches have no corrupting influences, because they are not tangible currency but rather the notice and grace of God.

- What things in this world are you afraid of losing? We all have them. How does this passage speak to those concerns?

- Do you find yourself building in "market loss" into your spiritual life? This might take the form of not fully investing in ministry or people because you think they might not be worth the effort? How do you correct this tendency?

Thursday, May 2

It might seem out of place to include the passage on worry (or anxiety) with the preceding passage about rewards and treasures, but Jesus is expanding the same point. Grammatically, Matthew connects the two with a particular conjunction (*dia touto*) often translated into English as "therefore," which is setting up this connection (Quarles, 2017: 67). The word rendered as "be anxious" or "worry" is *merimnaō*. It is not a common Greek word. In his parable of the seed, Jesus notes how this kind of anxiety chokes out the work of God (13:22). It is usually associated with the everyday concerns of life (1 Cor 7:33). Later, both Paul and Peter expanded upon Jesus's teaching here.

> *The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* (*Phil 4:5–7*)

> *Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.* (*1 Pet 5:6–7*)

The sense we get from Jesus's teaching is *not* that the everyday is not important, but rather that we must approach it with the perspective that God is the provider and we can trust that he will meet our needs (Gen 22:14). So much of our anxiety tends to stem from extending ourselves *beyond* God's provision and then falling back on God hoping he will meet needs we created for ourselves.

- In what ways have you experienced anxiety or worry choking out your future growth?

- Have you managed to overcome the worry? Is so, how did you do it?

Friday, May 3

Throughout the sermon, Jesus employs a number of metaphors and everyday illustrations that served to get his point across. Here, however, he invites the listeners to consider elements they could observe in their environment. In particular, he invites them to observe the natural rhythms of the birds (*peteinon*) and the lilies (*krinon*) of the field—the wildflowers. Both are elements of Galilean life. The Hula Valley, just north of the Sea of Galilee serves as a stopping point for African and Asian migratory birds. In the early spring, over half a billion

birds over 500 different species of birds arrive and rest there as they migrate to their summer homes. In the same season, vast fields of wildflowers cover the Galilean hills and the Golan Heights, something that is not seen elsewhere in Israel.

We often forget that Jesus spoke in the *real world*. It is likely that at the moment Jesus called attention to the birds of the air, it was because a flock of birds flew overhead. When he talks about the wildflowers, his listeners may have been surrounded by a rainbow carpet of anemones, cyclamens, and lupines—all flowers native to the Galilee that blossom together in the spring. Jesus's teaching resonated not only for the generations that followed but for the immediate audience. And Matthew's audience, many of whom were Galilean Jews, would have understood his illustration as well. Contrasting the natural beauty of the Galilee with Solomon and the Jerusalem temple was undoubtedly intentional.

- When Jesus says, "seek the kingdom of God first," do you think he is shifting focus off all the religious matters he has been dealing with and onto the creation around his listeners? How would their immediate surroundings have helped them understand what he was teaching?

- At times, Christianity can become so institutionalized and ordered that we forget that nature is not like that. God's created order is much more complex and interconnected, lacking "theological rigor" but nonetheless revealing God's hand at work. This weekend, take a few minutes or an hour or a day to simply be *in* God's creation without analysis or criticism. Receive the message of grace observable in the natural world.

"Unto Others"
Matthew 7:1–14

Monday, May 6

Jesus is trying to get his audience to shift their perspective away from their own holiness, their own righteousness, their own anxieties and to *see* others. The following chapter will address this in practical terms, but Jesus corrects the audience's perspective, and only then does he call them to action. So often, we want to have a list of actions, a spiritual to-do list that take care of whatever spiritual need it is that we might have.

Jesus uses the word *hypocrite* four times in this sermon. Within the context of the sermon, he has repeatedly established that many religious people perform "righteous" acts for the wrong reasons. Here, he asks his listeners not to judge by the standard that the hypocrites use. In fact, he addresses these religious people and their hypocrisy, calling them not to judge or reject those who do not conform to their "measure" (*metron*) of

righteousness. He does not make a universal prohibition on evaluating the morality of behavior, but rather he demands that righteousness be measured in terms of conformity to God's will and the Kingdom rather than human standards of appropriate religion.

- When you think of hypocrisy, what behaviors come to mind? Do you find the term tends to get used incorrectly or too broadly?

- How would you, as a Christian, respond to accusations of hypocrisy in your life?

Tuesday, May 7

What did Jesus mean when he talked about casting pearls before swine and giving holy things to dogs? He seems to be offering a contrast. A hypocrite can be judgmental based on human standards, but on the other extreme, we can desecrate the holy when we treat it as nothing, as something to be discarded. Both extremes are dangerous. Balancing honest authenticity with righteous discernment can be difficult.

Dogs and pigs were among the most unclean creatures in STJ. As most people know, pigs were not kosher and Jews were forbidden to keep them as livestock. Dogs were not kept as pets but rather were viewed as scavengers that "eat the bones of the sanctuary when the flesh is still on them" (4Q394 frag. 8 col. 4.8; 396 frag. 1 col. 1.9). They were therefore not allowed near any holy things. If a sacrificial animal was presented to the priests and found to have a flaw or blemish, the priests would throw it to the dogs of the city (*m. Tem. 6.5; b. Bek. 15a*). This may be what is behind Jesus's reference.

- Hypocrisy can be both pretended righteousness and disregard for the holy. How have you seen the latter type of hypocrisy practiced in our modern world?

- How do you maintain the balance between discernment and authenticity in your own spiritual life? What disciplines have you put in place to ensure you do not err to either side?

Wednesday, May 8

The triplet in verse 7 shows a submission to Christ. To ask, one must believe the person we are asking has the power to give. To seek, we must believe that which we are seeking can be found. To knock, we must go to the place where the person with the power can be found and commit. In other words, the capacity for answered prayer exists *beyond our means*. We can no more cause a prayer to be answered than we can provide for ourselves something we do not possess, find a place we do not have a map to or enter a door which we are not standing in front of. Like the Lord's Prayer, this passage entrusts the fulfillment of promises to God rather than crediting it to our ability to maintain a righteous enough attitude to make it happen for ourselves.

We can look back to Jesus's statement about empty repetition of prayers (6:7). We are not heard because of who we are and the nature of our requests. We are heard because of who God is and because we submit to his will, praying only for what he promises. God does not give us favors to use. He grants us the capacity to do his will. This is a sacred trust that requires much of us, namely the surrender of our own agendas and wants. This is a hard truth.

- Have you found yourself praying for things that you now realize were selfish or out of God's will? How did you correct your path?

- Consider Jesus's analogy of a father providing for his children. What methods do we use to teach our children what is appropriate to ask for, what is "theirs" to claim from us? Does that apply to us as well when it comes to requesting things from God?

Thursday, May 9

Do verses 7–8 teach that Christians can claim *anything* in faith and God will give it to them? Hardly. Jesus has emphasizes time and again in the sermon that the righteous are in conformity with the will of God. A righteous person therefore would not ask for something contrary to God's will, and if he does, he is aware of the reason why it is not given to him. We cannot take these verses and isolate them from the rest of the message. Notice that Jesus's illustration mentions bread, a reference back to "daily bread" in his model prayer (6:11). He therefore places the idea of asking/receiving within the sphere of a humble prayer in keeping with the rest of the message.

But Jesus is not really talking about prayer anyway. That is the introduction to the core idea, which is in verse 12. As he has done throughout the sermon, Jesus "flips the script" and points out that the kingdom is not about what you ask God for but rather how your treatment of others reflects God's treatment of you. God is generous to you, within his will. You should be generous to others, considering how you would want to be treated.

- How does thinking of the "golden rule" (7:12) as a reflection of God's treatment of us change your perspective on it?

- If the purpose of the Law and the Prophets is to reveal God's will, how does following this "golden rule" fulfill that purpose? Consider how the verse fits in with the Beatitudes as well, since Jesus draws a line from the behavior of his disciples to his own fulfillment of the Law and Prophets?

Friday, May 10

The conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount comes in the form of three pairs: two kinds of paths or gates (7:13–14), two kinds of prophets (7:15–23), and two kinds of foundations (7:24–27). This dichotomy has existed throughout the sermon, but in these final chapters it becomes very evident. The readers are commanded to *choose* one option or the other. Each of the illustrations operate a bit differently, but they all contrast self-centered internal attitudes with submission to Christ.

The Greek word translated as "narrow" is *stenos*, which appears only here and in its parallel passage in Luke 13:24. The metaphor of two paths seems to have been fairly common in Jewish thought at the time, appearing in in the Talmud (*b. Berakot.* 28b), STJ literature (4 Ezra 7:6–16) and even Qumran (1QS 3:20–21). It is probably borrowed from Jeremiah 21:8, "Behold, I set before you the way of life and the way of death." Jesus's expansion to include gates, however, is quite interesting. There is a similar reference in the pseudepigraphic "Testament of Abraham." (recension A, 1.11; Box, 1927: 17) There is a clear eschatological emphasis in the text, with the path being one's life, and the gate being to either destruction or blessing (Hagner, 2000: 178–79). While the "wide gates" to Jerusalem were open to all trade, the narrow gates were those known only to the few. You had to know the winding paths to get to such gates, and then had to have access to them since they were controlled by guards or proprietors. If you were a persecuted minority, such as the Christians in the first century, you needed to avoid the main gates or you were almost certainly going to be caught.

- What makes the work of seeking the narrow gate worthwhile? How does being a Christian compare to the "easier" roads others pursue?

"False Prophets"
Matthew 7:15–23

Monday, May 13

The identification of false prophets in this section should resonate with us as we observe the landscape of "Christianity" as it appears in the popular conscience. Television evangelists, over-the-air experts, and internet know-it-alls abound today; and they offer Christians a wide array of false, often dangerous messages. We often seek to be charitable, arguing that while we might not agree with them, these people are still our "Christian brothers and sisters."

Are they though? A wolf is a wolf. Rotten fruit cannot be made whole. Jesus makes it plain that he rejects these false prophets and calls them "lawless" (*anomia*). Consider for a moment how this idea of a false prophet, a person who looks like one thing but acts like a nothing, contrasts with Jesus's continual calls for the unification

of heart and eye, belief and idea throughout the sermon. A false prophet is not just someone who is confused or working through things. It is someone who is inwardly opposed to the Kingdom and the King but attempts to *appear* in harmony for the express purpose of taking advantage of the believers.

- If you have ever dealt with someone who deceived you to gain your trust and take advantage of you, reflect on how this is in conflict with Jesus's teachings. Even if this person was a "spiritual" person on the outside, they were not acting in concert with the will of God.

- How do we heal after being taken in by false prophets? What do we do with the scars that accumulate from their attacks and the damage they do?

Tuesday, May 14

There are only three places in the gospels where thornbushes (*akantha*) appear. Jesus uses them as an illustration here (also Luke 6:44). They appear in the parable of the seed (Matt 13:1–21; Mark 4:1–20; Luke 8:1–15); and finally, three gospels mention the crown of thorns (Matt 27:29; Luke 8:14; John 19:2). The author of Hebrews also employs the term in what is probably a reiteration of one of Jesus's parables (Heb 6:8). Thorns and thistles look *nothing* like grape vines or fig trees. Jesus makes a very obvious contrast, just as he describes the impossibility of a wolf pretending to be a sheep. Jesus's point is that false teachers don't *look anything like* true prophets. They don't bear true fruit. They are very good at convincing people that their false gospel is the same thing as the truth, but if you pause and look, there are obvious clues that they are lying.

Who could possibly be confused about wolves pretending to be sheep, or go to a thornbush looking for grapes? Two types of people: those who don't know any better and those who are so desperate to know that they don't verify, don't question. Predatory false prophets love both kinds of people.

- What are some obvious "false prophets" that draw in new believers and seekers even today?

- Do you find that pointing out the obvious issues with false prophets is an effective way to get people out from under their teachings? Why do false prophets tend to have such a strong hold on their followers?

Wednesday, May 15

Not everyone who professes to be a Christian is a true Christian. This is a truth that is present throughout the New Testament. The apostle John in particular warns his readers, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us" (1 John 2:19). How do we know who is a true believer and who is not? We simply

cannot glimpse into people's souls to know whether their confession is sincere or not. It is only in apostasy that we can recognize the false believer. Notice that I used the word *apostasy*, and not just *error*. Christians can be in error. They can be mistaken. John's point is that false believers *leave the faith*. This is what apostasy is. The apostate does not just misunderstand or make a mistake. The apostate willfully abandons the clear teaching of Scripture on the things which are *evident* for another authority.

Even then, however, Jesus says that we may not realize who is apostate until they are judged before his throne. The apostate can exist within even the most theologically robust church because some are perfectly capable for not acknowledging their errant beliefs "for the sake of unity." Our responsibility is (1) not to listen to apostate, false prophets and (2) make sure we are abiding in the truth of the Scripture. The apostates will be sorted out when Jesus returns to judge, and he will have absolute understanding.

- What are some of the non-negotiables (or fundamentals) of the faith that you might use as a standard for judging whether someone is apostate?

- Who should be responsible for dealing with apostates? Is it something individual believers should make judgments on by themselves?

Thursday, May 16

There was no point wasting energy on trying to fix a diseased fruit tree. Once the disease (*sapros*) got into the tree, you couldn't get it out. Jesus appears to be borrowing from Isaiah again.

> *"Therefore, as the tongue of fire devours the stubble, and as dry grass sinks down in the flame, so their root will be as rottenness, and their blossom go up like dust, for they have rejected the law of YHWH of hosts, and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel"* (Isaiah 5:24).

The Hebrew word here is *māq* (or *māqaq*) which has a sense of wasting away, like a tree that dries up and crumbles to dust. (Notice the parallel in the Isaiah passage above.) It is clearly associated with disease and damage (Ps 38:6; Zech 14:12). Jesus does not have in mind a little bit of rotten fruit but of a persistent disease which must be rooted out before it infects the rest of the orchard. The contemporary usage of the word "toxic" applies here. The rot of a false prophet is potentially a toxin for all around them.

- Why do you think people tend to tolerate false prophets and toxic behavior? Is it *really* out of Christian love or is there something deeper?

- Describe a time when you experienced the painful removal of something that would only do harm? It could be a relationship or even a physical experience. What are the difficulties of such a removal? And what are the advantages?

Friday, May 17

One last thing is worth noting about false prophets. They tend to look to external acts as justification for their "salvation." In Jesus's telling of their appeal to enter the kingdom, he says they will protest that they prophesied and cast our demons in his name. They count on their "mighty works" as validation of their supposed faith. Jesus is returning to the themes he brought up in his *antitheses* in chapter 5. People are quick to define their faith by actions, by "following the rules," and by people noticing they are "being holy." While the outward actions of the righteous and the unrighteous might look similar, the real test is whether they are doing these things because they are God's will (the righteous) or their own will (the unrighteous).

As strange as it sounds, doing "the right thing" can be sin. We turn righteous actions into sin when we do them for our own, selfish reasons. A false prophet's actions and even words may seem completely reasonable, even commendable. This is something that was true in the ancient church and is still true today. This is why we should not base our assessment of ministries and churches solely on "results." The underlying belief system, the ideas and thinking which motivate actions are far more important than the observable, quantifiable results. As J. R. R. Tolkien once wrote, "All that is gold does not glitter."

- Do you have experience with what you might now recognize as false prophecy in the church? How did you recognize the danger?

- What steps have you taken (or want to take) in your life to look for the deeper motives of people? How can you avoid turning this into a sort of pessimism or judmentalism?

"House on the Rock"
Matthew 7:24–27

Monday, May 20

Jesus leans heavily upon the wise/fool paradigm from Proverbs, but he shifts the focus away from the simple actions of "the wise" to adherence to his words, or more accurately, teachings (*logoi*). Jesus refers to a specific kind of lived out, practical wisdom (Pennington, 2017: 233–34). It is virtuous and long-term wisdom, as opposed to the wisdom of the moment or a particular kind of skill. He employs the image of a house, but it seems as if he is not describing just any house but *the* house—the Temple. We are so used to referring to the House of YHWH in Jerusalem as "the temple" that there is no Hebrew word for temple. It is only "the House of YHWH" or "the complex" (Heb. *heykal*). Most of the places where the English translations read "temple," the text is really "house."

This changes how we read Jesus's words almost immediately. We are not just speaking about a habitation, which can be built or torn down as necessary. This is a monument to God—the eternal God. Its construction requires a great deal more of us. A simple house requires walls and a roof. A temple requires planning, resources. Herod spent decades rebuilding the Jerusalem temple, and it was completed decades after his death. Building the church requires wisdom and planning and investment. It cannot be done quickly or "easily." There are no tricks to good building.

- What are some hallmarks of spiritual wisdom when it comes to building things up? How do they aid in the growth of believers and the Church?

- Identify some "shortcuts" people often employ when trying to build the Church. What kinds of floods and winds might cause problems when we employ these tactics?

Tuesday, May 21

Modern construction can pour its own "rock" in the form of a concrete footer. The ancient world lacked this technology, or rather concrete was the reserve of the Roman elites. This does not mean, however, that ancient construction was necessarily more poor than modern construction. Building a quality home required digging foundation trenches, which would go through the soil and eventually get down to the limestone or basalt bedrock. The Galilean site of Khirbet Qana (possibly the "Cana" of John 2) has evidence of substantial excavations for construction (Fiensy, 2014; 189–90). These towns tended to be sited on hillsides near water sources like springs or streams. The Galilee Mountains would have had torrential flooding during the rainy seasons, with streams that are small or dry during most of the year suddenly swelling or cutting new courses. Construction would, by its nature, change the flow of water. These floods are no longer experienced today because of modern irrigation methods (Gaith, 1999: 52; Hershkovitz, 2018: 138). If a house was not constructed well, the rainy season would destroy it.

A well-built house could last pretty much forever. It is hardly a surprise that the village of Capernaum still has a solidly built house near the shore of the Sea of Galilee which is believed to have been Simon Peter's home. The foundations, which are basalt blocks, reach down to the very bedrock. Although the upper structure was destroyed centuries ago, the outline is still easily seen and the walls were reconstructed and are visible today.

- Have you "built" parts of your spiritual life on shoddy, quick foundations? What have the results of this been?

- How did you repair the situation to improve? Are there still issues due to these poor choices?

Wednesday, May 22

If we look into the idea of buildings and foundations in the Hebrew Scriptures, there are a number of passages that Jesus might have been exegeting and interpreting here. One that stands out, however, is Isaiah 28:15–18. As we have noted, Matthew's gospel relies heavily upon Isaiah. There, God pronounces judgment on those who "have made a covenant with death," a figure of speech for complete foolishness. It is equivalent to, "You'll kill yourself if you do that." In particular, comparing the refuge one has in God's house and that provided by folly, Isaiah notes, "Whoever believes will not be in haste" (Isa 28:16). This Hebrew phrase (*ham'amîn lo' yaḥîš*) is presented as if it is a token or slogan. One commentator reads it as "founded by the Master Builder who hurries not" (Irwin, 1977: 31–32; cf. Prov 8:29–30). Regardless of its exact meaning, this possibly something that was inscribed on the cornerstone of an important building, possibly even the Jerusalem temple (Childs, 2001: 209). It would have been visible to all who walked by, with the builder's testimony of strength reinforced by the endurance of the structure itself.

It may be that this passage in Isaiah is a polemic against the rhetoric employed in Canaanite religion for constructing temples. Although they predate Isaiah by several centuries, there is a song that appears in the Ugaritic Baʿal Cycle (UBC) that says exactly the opposite.

> "Quickly, build the house,
> Quickly erect the palace.
> "Quickly shall you buil[d] the house,
> Quickly shall you erect the pal[ace],
> "Amid the summit of Sapan." (*CAT* 1.4 V.52–55)

The haste of the construction is necessary in the UBC because Baʿal has won a victory over other, older gods and wishes to assert his superiority by being worshiped. The urgency is such that he does not even allow the builders to include a window. The one God has no need for haste. There is no one who will take his power from him, so we do not build in haste. We build with wisdom.

- How is building your spiritual life like building a temple to God?

- Take a few minutes to consider 1 Corinthians 3:10–23 and its meaning in relationship to this discussion.

Thursday, May 23

Jack Kingsbury once described the failure of STJ leaders to accept Jesus this way: "owing to the leaders' abject repudiation of Jesus, they unwittingly effect, not the salvation of Israel as they had anticipated, but just the opposite, Israel's demise as God's special people" (Kingsbury, 1988: 124). While Kingsbury advocated a theological perspective that rejected Israel's role in the kingdom (something I disagree with him about), he is spot-on in the effect of the Jewish leaders' rejection of Jesus. One could almost forgive the hardness of their

hearts to Jesus while he was ministering, but after the resurrection, their rejection became willful and adamant. To put it another way, Jesus did not reject Second Temple Judaism. Second Temple Judaism rejected Jesus.

Jesus did not call his audience to build upon *a rock*, but upon *the rock*. Paul came to understand Jesus as the rock which provided living water to Israel (1 Cor 10:4). "Jesus not only affords a concluding parallel between himself and Moses, but also between his words and the source of salvation in the Temple" (Welch, 2009: 180). Looking back at Jesus's words, we can see that he is making it clear that he was the Lawgiver, the Temple Maker. The foundation upon which the Temple was built was the presence of God among His people. Jesus now incarnated that presence, and the Temple authorities rejected Him. They rejected their foundation (21:42; cf. Ps 118:22; Acts 4:11; 1 Pet 2:4). The Church that is founded upon Christ will withstand the storms. The church founded on the same faulty foundations as STJ had become is bound to fall.

- Consider Romans 11:11–24 in light of this understanding of the relationship of the Church to Second Temple Judaism.

- Discuss the Romans passage in depth with someone, considering what it means for the Gentiles to be "grafted in" and Paul's warning about the results of unbelief.

Friday, May 24

Generally, Jewish sermons were supposed to end with a note of comfort (*Sif. Deut.* 342). Jesus does not. Jesus ends instead with an admonition that failure to follow his word will result in a great collapse (7:27). This is the only place where this Greek word (*ptosis*) appears. It is tied to the idea of a collapse to the ground or a death. Could he have in mind the fall of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70? Perhaps. There is no reason to think that the early church would have not seen this as connecting to the temple.

The destruction of the Jerusalem temple did shake Judaism to its core. The priesthood and the Sadducees lost any power and influence, virtually disappearing from the historical record, though they likely did persist in some new form (Goodman, 2006: 153–62). The Pharisees were scattered but eventually met at Yavneh where they developed what became rabbinical Judaism (Cohen, 1984: 44–70). Christians, however, had fled Jerusalem and were already developing a new identity which fused Jews and Gentiles based on their common faith in Christ. Jesus's admonition was taken to heart, and the Christians relied upon this building metaphor for the Church (1 Cor 3:9; Heb 3:3; 1 Pet 2:5).

- How is the motivation of a "negative" ending different from a more positive or comforting ending? What value is there in the dissonance of a warning as conclusion?

- Consider Paul's discussion of the nature of our "grafting" found in Romans 11:11–24. In light of this discussion of the "fall" or "cutting off" of Judaism, what conclusions can we draw about the dangers to the church that falls into apostasy?

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