



THE GOOD LIFE

A Study of the
Beatitudes of Jesus

small group guide
2017 lent 6-week study



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In western Christianity, Lent is the forty-day period lasting from Ash Wednesday to Easter. Ash Wednesday commemorates the beginning of Jesus' forty days of fasting, prayer, and temptation in the desert. Lent is generally observed as a time of reflection, penitence, prayer, and fasting to prepare our hearts for the celebration of Christ's resurrection on Easter. You may have noticed that this period is actually more than forty days. The six Sundays of Lent have traditionally not been included in the number because every Sunday is a joyful celebration and commemoration of Christ's resurrection and therefore not an occasion for fasting. The word Lent comes from the Old English word *lencten*, meaning spring, or lengthen (as in hours of daylight).

The SPC sermon series for Lent, 2017, focuses largely on the Beatitudes as recorded in the book of Luke. The Beatitudes are found in both Matthew and Luke as part of Jesus' teachings known as the "Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 5-7) and the "Sermon on the Plain" (Luke 4). These passages include some of the most quintessential and important teachings of Jesus. John R. Stott writes that they are the closest thing to a "manifesto" of his kingdom that Jesus ever gave. Dale Bruner calls them "Jesus' State of the Universe Address, his Messianic Inaugural." Each passage begins with a similar but different version of the Beatitudes in which Jesus pronounces blessings on his followers. While Matthew's version is considerably longer, the two have much in common in addition to the Beatitudes: the golden rule, the command to love our enemies and to turn the other cheek, the injunction against judging other people, and the illustrations of the plank or speck in one's eye and of a tree and its fruit. Both passages end with the parable about people who build their houses on sand or solid rock.

We offer this study guide to help focus your own personal reflection and study and to enhance small group discussions during the weeks of Lent. This guide is based on the sermon series passages and other related Scriptures. Please note that this is a guide, not a prescription for your small group. There are too many questions each week to discuss in one session. We hope that you will choose a few questions each time that will be beneficial to your own small group and promote fruitful discussion. We offer this study guide with our prayers for your blessing and encouragement as you explore the Scriptures together during this season of Lent.

Thanks everyone,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Austin Ashenbrenner". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Austin

At the beginning of your first small group meeting, it is a good idea to create a group covenant or agreement. This can be a physical document or simply a conversation that arrives at consensus. As a group you will want to discuss what you are hoping to get out of the group and, just as importantly, what you are willing to commit to together in order to reach those expectations. It is also a good idea to revisit the covenant on an annual basis, just to remind yourselves of the commitments that have been made and possibly revise or add to them.

Sample Small Group Covenant

The covenant is designed to stipulate the expectations and responsibilities of the group members. This is a suggested list; you are welcome to create your own covenant or add to this one.

Meeting Day: _____ Meeting Time: _____

Length of Meetings: _____ Frequency of Meetings: _____

Location(s) of Meeting: _____
(Does not need to be only at one house.)

Refreshments: _____
(This can be more than one person also.)

Group Facilitator(s): _____

We agree on the following:

1. ___ To come to the Bible study prepared to participate and discuss. For some groups this may mean studying the passage and questions ahead of your meeting time. For others, it will simply mean coming to the group ready to learn, share, and grow.
2. ___ To participate in discussions. This includes participating by listening to others, and helping others, and helping all members have the opportunity to discuss and share.
3. ___ To respect the confidentiality of the group, keeping personal information within the group.
4. ___ To care for one another by listening, affirming, asking questions of, encouraging, protecting, and praying for one another.
5. ___ To be open with one another by sharing feelings, joys, struggles, and hurts, acknowledging that the goal of authentic relationships begins with being open with one another.
6. ___ To collaborate with one another to create a healthy group by being honest, sharing in creating the vision for what the group ought to be and pursuing our objectives together.
7. ___ To look for opportunities as a group to serve others.
8. ___ Any other key commitments we would like to make to one another.

Opening Activity:

Have you ever been truly lost, perhaps in a forest or in an unfamiliar city, when suddenly you came upon a path or road you recognized and you knew where you were? Or even better, you suddenly came upon someone who knew the way and offered to take you where you needed to go? Describe this experience and your feelings at the time. Such an experience may shed light on our study of the Beatitudes and the meaning of the word “blessed.”

Hearing The Text: Read Luke 6:17–20, and Matthew 5:1–3.

Related texts: Luke 4:18–22, and Luke 18:18–26

According to Luke, Jesus has just spent the night in prayer before choosing twelve of his disciples to be his apostles. Jesus begins to teach his followers what it means that the kingdom of God is already among them. He introduces them to a completely new kind of life, one they were not expecting. As many have observed, he seems to be turning the world upside down—or perhaps right side up.

1. As you read Luke 6:17–20, try to picture yourself as one of those in the crowd surrounding Jesus. Remembering that in this society the sick, the lame, and the blind were the outcast and marginalized, notice your own pain, suffering, and needs in yourself and those around you. How do you feel when you hear Jesus say, “Blessed are you who are *poor*”? What do these words mean to you?
2. Theologian Dale Bruner writes, “Jesus begins, significantly, not with demands but with blessings.” For “*blessed*,” Bruner uses the term “*blessings on*,” because “Jesus is doing more than conveying *facts*, he is giving *help*.” What do these observations tell us about Jesus?
3. Is Jesus saying that poverty is a good thing? Is he saying that we’re blessed only if we’re poor—that it’s great to be miserable? If not, what is he saying?
4. What does Jesus mean when he proclaims to the poor that the kingdom of God is theirs? What is the kingdom of God? What does this Beatitude say about the accessibility of the kingdom of God? How does one enter the kingdom of God?
5. Read Luke 6:24. In this counterpart to the first Beatitude, things seem to sound worse for many of us. Now what is Jesus saying? Does he really mean that we are doomed if we are wealthy? That we cannot be part of his kingdom?
6. Read Luke 18:18–26. How does this text compare with, and deepen your understanding of, Luke 6:24? What challenge does Jesus offer the ruler and why is it so difficult for him to do what Jesus recommended? What will be the benefit if he does follow Jesus’ instruction? Is this benefit merely for the future or also for the present time? Explain.

Responding to the Text:

Paying close attention to God’s Word is important. The next step is to connect that Word to our lives so that we can be “hearers and doers” of God’s Word.

1. The Beatitudes have often been interpreted primarily as rewards for good attitudes, rather than blessings upon those who find themselves in difficult circumstances. Dale Bruner writes that the

Beatitudes were “first for people in bad situations, not for people with good attitudes, ...not because of their virtues but because of their inadequacies.” What does it mean to you personally to hear this Beatitude first of all as a message of sheer grace?

2. If Jesus’ kingdom message was “good news to the poor,” (Luke 4:18) and his first words of blessing were for the poor, the marginalized and disenfranchised, what are the implications for us as his followers?
3. After Easter, SPC will celebrate a time of “Small Groups in Mission.” During this season of Lent, we are asking that you make plans with your small group to participate in an outreach activity together among local people who are in need. The Mission Department will provide suggestions and opportunities for you, but some of you may already be aware of opportunities that you wish to pursue. Although we plan to observe a special day of “Small Groups in Mission,” not all activities need to be done on the same day.

For Further Consideration:

“*The Son of God simply blesses broken people.* The Beatitudes must first be heard as grace, or they will not be heard correctly. Jesus’ Beatitudes bless persons not because of their virtues, but because of their inadequacies. This observation, which must be frequently recalled, will keep us close to the deepest truth of the text and so to the deepest grace of Jesus. Jesus’ Beatitudes are as wide as the world, which is to say, they are as wide as Jesus’ love.” (Dale Bruner, *The Christbook*)

“*Jesus, the Blessed One, is poor. The poverty of Jesus is much more than an economic or social poverty. Jesus is poor because he freely chose powerlessness over power, vulnerability over defensiveness, dependency over self-sufficiency. As the great ‘Song of Christ’ so beautifully expresses, He...did not count equality with God something to be grasped. But he emptied himself...becoming as human beings are*” (Philippians 2:6-7). *This is the poverty of spirit that Jesus chose to live. Jesus calls us who are blessed as he is to live our lives with that same poverty.*” (Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*)

Understanding Terms:

Blessed or “Blessings on”: “‘Blessings on’ means, compactly, ‘I am with you. I am on your side.’” (Dale Bruner) Earl Palmer writes that *blessed* also carries the Hebrew meaning of being “on the right road or path.” Combining the two ideas we might say, “I am with you on the way.”

The poor: “The word for poor means the abject poor, the abysmally impoverished, those completely dependent on others to make it, probably in our country some of the much maligned ‘welfare poor.’ (It) was the strongest word for poor that was available.” (Dale Bruner)

The kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven is best understood as the kingship or the sovereign and saving reign of God, which according to Jesus was and is breaking in to the present world, to earth. That is what Jesus taught us to pray for in the words, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” (N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*)

Hearing the Text: Read Luke 6:21 & 25

Related text: Isaiah 58:6-12

As we consider the second Beatitude, we need to remind ourselves again that the Beatitudes are first for people in bad situations not for people with good attitudes. They are “gospel: good news, not good advice.” (N.T. Wright)

1. Jesus reiterates his blessings on the hungry poor. In addition to hunger for food, what other hungers or cravings did these people experience? What hungers or cravings do people in our society experience? How do you think Jesus speaks to these hungers?
1. Matthew 5:6 reads, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.” Some have described hunger for righteousness as a “deep, even physical longing for a painfully missed justice.” How might this shed light on our understanding of Jesus’ second Beatitude?
1. Read Luke 6:25. Blessings and contrasting woes were common in Hebrew literature. Throughout the ancient world, much popular literature and folklore depicted comedic caricatures of flabby rich men suffering pain and misery from their luxurious, gluttonous lifestyles. How could this background help us appreciate how Jesus’ audience might have heard these woes?
1. The common belief at the time was that the prosperity of the rich was a sign of God’s special favor. How do these texts speak to the “health and wealth gospel” or “prosperity gospel” promoted in some places today—or to success seminars proclaiming that it’s the winners of the world who have God’s blessing?
1. Read aloud Isaiah 58:6-10. During Lent, people often observe a fast from certain kinds of foods or activities. What is the fast that God chooses for his people in this passage? How do these verses deepen our understanding of the Beatitudes and the kingdom Jesus invites to enter?

Responding to the Text:

Paying close attention to God’s Word is important. The next step is to connect that Word to our lives so that we can be “hearers and doers” of God’s Word.

1. Think about hungers and cravings that you experience personally. Consider sharing with your small group how Jesus has come alongside you and helped you in these areas. How have other people ministered to you in them? How can your small group come alongside you and pray for you?
2. Read Henri Nouwen’s thoughts on Jesus’ hungering for uprightness. How does this meditation deepen your understanding of the Beatitude?
3. Look again at Isaiah 58:6-10. Discuss the implications of this passage for our own lives. How might your small group participate in an aspect of the fast described in these verses? Last week we invited your small group to plan how you might participate in a day of small groups in mission in our community. This would be a good time to continue that discussion.

For Further Consideration:

“Jesus, the Blessed Child of God, hungers and thirsts for uprightness. He abhors injustice. He resists those who try to gather wealth and influence by oppression and exploitation. His whole being yearns for people to treat one another as brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of the same God.

With fervor he proclaims that the way to the Kingdom is not found in saying many prayers or offering many sacrifices but in feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and the prisoners. (See Matthew 25:31-46.) He longs for a just world. He wants us to live with the same hunger and thirst.” (Henri Nouwen, Bread for the Journey)

“Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or to walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support, for one’s fellow human beings and for that matter one’s fellow nonhuman creatures, of course every prayer, and every deed that spreads the gospel...and makes the name of Jesus honored in the world—all of this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make.” (N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*)

“Luke’s Beatitudes look physical, Matthew’s spiritual. The contrast is important. Luke’s Beatitudes single out the *really* poor, hungry, and crying, and it is good that we have a social evangelist who heard Jesus point in this direction. The gospel is for the physically and not only for the spiritually poor.

But Luke can be over interpreted to mean, ‘how great to be poor, hungry, and crying, because in the next life it won’t be so bad.’ Luke’s Jesus can be misunderstood to mean, ‘Isn’t it wonderful to be miserable?’ That is why we need Matthew’s quite correct interpretation of the Hebrew ‘poor,’ namely those who are poor and feel crushed as a result, ‘poor in spirit.’ Jesus means, in Matthew’s translation, ‘blessed are those who feel their poverty, who suffer their poverty, and so cry out.’ Jesus incorporated both Matthew’s spirituality and Luke’s sociality, getting the best of each. Just as we need two eyes to see in perspective, so with important sayings we need at least two witnesses to understand in perspective.” (Dale Bruner, *The Christbook*)

WEEK
TWO

The Good Life: A Study of the Beatitudes of Jesus

Hearing the Text: Read Luke 6:21b & 25b; Matthew 5:5

Related text: Psalm 13

As we consider the Beatitudes, we need to remind ourselves frequently that the Beatitudes are first for people in bad situations not for people with good attitudes. They are “gospel: good news, not good advice.”
(N.T. Wright)

1. Read Luke 6:21b. Jesus specifically blesses those who weep now, those who are broken hearted now, not those who once mourned. Dale Bruner writes, “On Jesus’ authority, in deep sadness, human beings are in God’s hands more than at any other time.” In what way does this distinction bring even greater meaning to the third Beatitude? How does this statement speak to you personally?
2. “The deepest joy may reside in persons with the deepest sadness. Jesus lends his authority to the perception that it is those for whom sadness is deep that God is real” (Bruner). Do you agree with these statements? Explain. How does the third Beatitude affirm these ideas?
3. Theologians suggest that Jesus may be referring to those who weep over the conditions of this world and the suffering resulting from them. How does this perspective deepen your understanding of the third Beatitude? What else might cause us to weep now?
4. The third woe suggests that laughter can quickly change to mourning. Laughter here seems to be the cynical laughter of the fool, reminiscent of Ecclesiastes 2:2, “For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of fools; this also is vanity.” Contrast this laughter with that of verse 21.
5. Read Psalm 13. What does this Psalm of lament reveal about God? What does it reveal about people? How might it speak to us in our own grief and sadness?

Responding to the Text:

Paying close attention to God’s Word is important. The next step is to connect that Word to our lives so that we can be “hearers and doers” of God’s Word.

1. Isaiah 61:1-2 says, “He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted...to comfort all who mourn.” How have you experienced Jesus’ blessing and comfort in your own times of mourning or heartbreak? Has Jesus used someone in your life to bless and comfort you in times of mourning and loss? If you feel comfortable, share that experience with your small group.
2. Can you recall a time when you have felt deep joy in the midst of deep sadness? If you are comfortable, share your thoughts with your small group.
3. Romans 12:15 instructs us to “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” How do we live this out in our own small group? How might we more effectively put this into practice together?
4. How might we “weep with those who weep” in the world around us? What might happen if we were to pray a psalm like Psalm 13 not just for ourselves but also for others in the world who feel they are forgotten and forsaken by God? How might God be calling us to respond to such people in a tangible way?

For Further Consideration:

“Jesus, the Blessed One, mourns. Jesus mourns when his friend Lazarus dies (John 11:33-36); he mourns when he overlooks the city of Jerusalem, soon to be destroyed (Luke 19:41-44). Jesus mourns over all losses and devastations that fill the human heart with pain. He grieves with those who grieve and sheds tears with those who cry.

The violence, greed, lust, and so many other evils that have distorted the face of the earth and its people cause the Beloved Son of God to mourn. We too must mourn if we hope to experience God’s consolation.”
(Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*)

“Joy is hidden in compassion. The word compassion literally means, “to suffer with.” It seems quite unlikely that suffering with another person would bring joy. Yet being with a person in pain, offering simple presence to someone in despair, sharing times of confusion and uncertainty...such experiences can bring us deep joy. Not happiness, not excitement, not great satisfaction, but the quiet joy of being there for someone else and living in deep solidarity with our brothers and sisters in this human family. Often this is a solidarity of weakness, in brokenness, in woundedness, but it leads us to the center of joy, which is sharing our humanity with others.”
(Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*)

**WEEK
THREE**

The Good Life: A Study of the Beatitudes of Jesus

Hearing the Text: Read Luke 6:22, 26-36, and John 14:25-28

If given the choice, most of us would prefer to be liked rather than hated by our co-workers, family, and acquaintances. So what do we make of this encouragement to be hated or reviled on account of Jesus? As we have discussed earlier in this series we recognize that in this message Jesus is introducing us to the Kingdom of God in our midst. He is welcoming us into a new way of life that runs very differently than we are accustomed to. In this “blessing” and “woe” statement Jesus is acknowledging something that we already know deep inside: this new Kingdom of God way of life is not the way our world works today. It might sound good, but change this radical will not be welcomed with open arms.

1. Explore the context of this passage. What is happening in Luke 6 leading up to this “sermon”? How does Jesus’ calling of the twelve apostles prior to beginning to describe the new way of life in God’s Kingdom shape the way we see this passage? Are these “blessings” and “woes” about everyday real life or are they about larger spiritual realities?
2. In his book, *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard writes that Jesus’ teaching style in this passage involves “show and tell.” He’s pointing to specific daily conditions in their midst and helping his followers understand the concrete reality of his message for their lives. When you read this passage does it feel like a lesson that hits “close to home” or do the notions of being hungry, weeping, poor, and hated, feel distant or strange to you? Based on your response what does it mean that our lives do or don’t connect with this passage?
3. Matthew’s gospel uses the words, “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you” (Matt. 5: 11). Why do you think Jesus presents persecution and hatred as natural byproducts of faithfulness to Christ? How would you describe the world’s reaction today to the words of Jesus? Are Christians hated, persecuted, ignored, pitied, respected, or something else?

Responding to the Text:

“Jesus’ call to the kingdom now, is of such a radical nature that anyone who takes it seriously will be under constant temptation to disconnect it from ‘normal’ human existence.” (Dallas Willard) Let’s connect this text to our normal lives....

1. Consider this quote from Greg Boyle, “Scripture scholars contend that the original language of the Beatitudes should not be rendered as ‘Blessed are the single-hearted’ or ‘Blessed are the peacemakers’ or ‘Blessed are those who struggle for justice.’ Greater precision in translation would say, ‘You’re in the right place if...you are single-hearted or work for peace.’ The Beatitudes is not a spirituality, after all. It’s a geography. It tells us where to stand.” From *Tattoos on the Heart*.
2. If the Beatitudes place an importance on our physical location what does this tell us about this week’s focus? Where would we place ourselves to be in contact with those who disagreed with us or possibly even hated us?
3. How does this section of the beatitudes encourage us to live in an increasingly divided world today? Where are those places where we should seek peace and love of our enemy and where are those places where we should follow Jesus knowing that we will be hated or misunderstood?

For Further Consideration:

“The one thing we must see is that the Beatitudes are not a mild and sentimental collection of platitudes. They are a frontal challenge to almost everything we assume about ‘the way it is’ in the world. The only way they make sense is if Jesus Christ himself is able to sustain the blessings he pronounces. When that fact becomes our fact, and when we have become convinced that Jesus Christ has the authority to support his promises, then the word *blessed* not only invites us to find the right path but also to welcome the path we find.

We now have the biblical doctrine of success. Success is not measured in possessions or by the state of our health. Success means to be where I am supposed to be - the right place at the right time for the right reason - because of the purpose for my life that has its origins in God’s love and faithfulness. If I am on the right road, then I am successful in this radical rearrangement of our ordinary value systems. Success... is a word about relationship with the Shepherd - Lord of the pathway and about our journey upon that pathway.” (Earl Palmer, *The Enormous Exception*)

“Jesus, the favorite Child of God, is persecuted. He who is poor, gentle, mourning; he who hungers and thirsts for uprightness; he who is merciful, pure of heart, and a peacemaker is not welcome in this world. The Blessed One of God is a threat to the established order and a source of constant irritation to those who consider themselves the rulers of this world. Without accusing anyone he is considered an accuser, without condemning anyone he makes people feel guilty and ashamed, without judging anyone those who see him feel judged. In their eyes, he cannot be tolerated and needs to be destroyed, because letting him be seems like a confession of guilt.

When we strive to become like Jesus, we cannot expect to be liked and admired. We have to be prepared to be rejected.” (Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*)

Hearing the Text: Read Luke 6:37-42

Renowned preacher Fred Craddock writes, “Without justice and fairness, grace degenerates into permissiveness, just as justice without grace hardens into cruelty.” His point is that mercy and justice always seem to be in tension. In our passage this week we see that tension. Jesus is telling his own followers to stop judging and condemning others. Let’s explore this tension and our personal experiences with the teaching not to judge others.

1. How do we interrupt the teaching “judge not, and you will not be judged?” Is the judgment that we may experience coming from God or from others? Explain. It seems consistent with Jesus’ teaching elsewhere that God’s grace covers all of our sins. This warning, therefore, would be pointing to a reality of human-to-human relationships. How does this reading of the text resonate with you?
2. Each of Jesus’ two object lessons (a blind person falling into a pit, and removing the speck from your own eye) focus on the theme of vision. Why is this metaphor most helpful in this teaching about judgment? What is it about simply seeing others without talking or sharing understanding that leads to judgment?
3. Discuss the phrase, “the measure you give will be the measure you get back” (vs. 38) in comparison to Jesus’ teaching in Luke 15:11-32 (the Prodigal Son). In the Luke 15 passage it seems that Jesus is the Father who gives us far more than we give or far more than we deserve. How then might we understand Luke 6:38 in context of Jesus’ larger message?

Responding to the Text:

Scripture invites us to love our brothers/sisters/neighbors and care for them. Sometimes the act of loving can rightly mean that we help those that we love avoid destructive or harmful behavior. Yet, this same desire to act lovingly can easily slip into the realm of standing in judgment of others. This dynamic can be challenging to navigate. Discuss as a group how we can encourage each other in love without judging or condemning each other.

1. At the root of this teaching, why do think Jesus wants us to avoid judging each other? What is the danger of trying to correct each other? If we don’t judge each other, who will?
2. Jesus suggests that one antidote to judgment of others is a healthy amount of introspection and self-examination. Discuss as a group how this has been helpful in your own growth or if it has been challenging. What other practical steps have you attempted that have been helpful in your work to not be judgmental of others?
3. Discuss the quotation at the top of the page. How have you wrestled with the tension between mercy and justice or between judgment and permissiveness? How has this been challenging or where have you experienced this as life-giving?

For Further Consideration:

“Judging others makes us blind, whereas love is illuminating. By judging others we blind ourselves to our own evil and to the grace which others are just as entitled to as we are. But in the love of Christ we know all about every conceivable sin and guilt; for we know how Jesus suffered, and how all men have been forgiven at the foot of the cross. Christian love sees the fellow-man under the cross and therefore sees with clarity. If when we judge others, our real motive was to destroy evil, we should look for evil where it is sure to be found, and that is in our own hearts. But if we are on the lookout for evil in others, our real motive is obviously to justify ourselves, for we are seeking to escape punishment for our own sins by passing judgment on others, and are assuming by implication that the word of God applies to ourselves in one way, and to others in another.” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*)

“To the degree that we accept that through Christ we ourselves have been reconciled with God we can be messengers of reconciliation. Essential to the work of reconciliation is a nonjudgmental presence. We are not sent to the world to judge, to condemn, to evaluate, to classify, to label. When we walk around as if we have to make up our minds about people and tell them what is wrong with them and how they should change, we only create more division. Jesus says it clearly, ‘Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate. Do not judge;...do not condemn;...forgive’ (Luke 6:36-37)

“In a world that constantly asks us to make up our minds about other people, a nonjudgmental presence seems nearly impossible. But it is one of the most beautiful fruits of a deep spiritual life and will be easily recognized by those who long for reconciliation.” (Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*)

Hearing the Text: Read Luke 6:43-45 (and Matthew 7:15-20)

Dallas Willard writes that we need to view Jesus' "sermon" as a whole, not just a collection of random sayings. While we must hear Jesus' Beatitudes first as sheer grace, we also recognize that throughout the sermon Jesus is speaking truth to the deepest needs of our hearts. His purpose is to clarify the nature of his kingdom and to help us live the kingdom life he calls us to. For this we need a "kingdom heart."

1. Jesus now uses examples from agriculture, in the form of agricultural rules or proverbs to address good and evil. We usually don't think of trees as "good" or "bad." Why do you think Jesus chooses these examples? How do we know whether a tree is "good" or "bad"? What is he implying about plants and people?
2. In verses 37-42, which we studied last week, Jesus prohibits judging others. Now he indicates that we actually can judge both trees and people. What is the difference here? How is Jesus clarifying his teaching? On what evidence can we judge?
3. Read verse 45. What is the source of the fruit produced in one's life? What is the heart and what is its function in human life?
4. Dallas Willard reminds us that in the Bible, the heart is the very core, spirit, or will of the human being. How does this help us understand, the biblical teaching that "human good and evil are matters of the heart"? How do our actions and the words of our mouths reveal what is in our hearts?

Responding to the Text:

Paying close attention to God's Word is important. The next step is to connect that Word to our lives so that we can be "hearers and doers" of God's Word.

1. Jesus' teaching seems to sound more and more difficult. Now he expects us not only to treat others as we hope to be treated, but to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us, to pray for those who harm us, to lend without expecting anything in return - to produce really good fruit in our lives. How can we possibly do what he expects of us? Can we actually do these things in our normal, everyday lives?

"The point of it all - the point of God's call to Israel, of God's call to every individual - is, in fact, to produce truly human beings. That's the thrust of the riddle about the trees and fruit. Moral reformation which leaves the heart untouched is about as useful as tying bunches of grapes on to a briar-bush. Jesus is inviting his hearers to a way of life, which is so completely new that it will need a change of heart, a change deep down in the personality. There are many alternatives to Jesus' invitation on the market today, just as there were in his time, but they don't touch the real problem.
(N.T. Wright. *Luke for Everyone*)
2. What is the deepest need of the human heart? What other "alternatives" have you tried that have not worked? What is the only way that such radical change can possibly happen? Is this simply a matter of "believing in Jesus"? Or "asking Jesus into our hearts" and we're good to go? Why or why not?
3. Read and discuss the quotations below by C.S. Lewis. How do these words resonate with you? What stands out for you? What questions do they raise for you? Spend some time reflecting on them together.

For Further Consideration:

“The terrible thing, the almost impossible thing, is to hand over your whole self - all your wishes and precautions—to Christ. But it is far easier than what we are all trying to do instead. For what we are trying to do is to remain what we call, “ourselves,” to keep personal happiness as our great aim in life, and yet at the same time be “good.” We are all trying to let our mind and heart go their own way - centered on money or pleasure or ambition—and hoping, in spite of this, to behave honestly and chastely and humbly. And that is exactly what Christ warned us not to do. As He said, a thistle cannot produce figs. If I am a field that contains nothing but grass seed, I cannot produce wheat. Cutting the grass may keep it short, but I shall still produce all grass and no wheat. If I want to produce wheat, the change must go deeper than the surface. I must be plowed up and resown.

He meant that we must go in for the full treatment. It is hard; but the sort of compromise we are all hankering after is harder - in fact, it is impossible. It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: it would be a jolly sight harder for a bird to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And we cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad.” (C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*)

“I think that many of us, when Christ has enabled us to overcome one or two sins that were an obvious nuisance, are inclined to feel (though we do not put it into words) that we are now good enough. He has done all we wanted Him to do, and we should be obliged if He would now leave us alone. As we say, “I never expected to be a saint; I only wanted to be a decent ordinary chap.” And we imagine that when we say this we are being humble. But this is a fatal mistake. Of course we never wanted, never asked, to be made into the sort of creatures He is going to make us into. But the question is not what we intended ourselves to be, but what He intended us to be when He made us.” (C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*)

For Additional Study:

In Matthew’s account of this passage, Jesus identifies the bad trees as false teachers with a false gospel. Earl Palmer writes, “Who Jesus Christ is and what his Lordship means is the central question above all possible questions—all of the theological questions and all of the ethical ones too. Or to put it theologically, ‘*Christology is the crucial turning point in our search for truth.*’ Bonhoeffer has given us some examples for testing a false gospel on the basis of its fruits.”

“Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system...the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner...forgiveness without requiring repentance....Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*)

What are Palmer and Bonhoeffer both saying here? How do these insights deepen our understanding of this part of Jesus’ sermon?



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