

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Notes for Study, Meditation and Reflection

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Fr. Peter Babej

List of Spiritual Topics

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Introduction

Father Philip Ruh (OMI), a well known Belgian priest and architect, designed and supervised the construction of many Ukrainian Catholic churches across Canada. Even though his formal architectural education was limited, he had a knack for building beautiful churches. In 1943, Father Philip was asked to design and supervise the construction of a new church for St. Cyril and Methodius Parish in St. Catharines. The pastor at the time was Fr. Isidore Borecky, who was consecrated Bishop of Toronto in 1948. Construction began in the spring of 1944. The basement was dug and the concrete for the foundation was poured. When the city inspectors arrived, they asked to see a copy of the blueprints. There were no blueprints. Fr. Ruh had the design in his head, and he “eyed” the construction of the foundation. The blueprints were drawn after construction had started.

In building churches, homes or lives, it’s important to have blueprints drawn before construction starts. **If we have blueprints, we have a goal, and we have a guide.** Essentially, that is exactly what the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) is – a “spiritual blueprint.” First, it outlines the goal – the kingdom of God. The imminence of the kingdom of God is the single consistent theme throughout the sermon. And second, it provides a guide as to what it means to be a disciple of Jesus in light of His kingdom, and how to build one’s life on solid rock, as a permanent fixture of that kingdom.

The Sermon on the Mount ends with a fitting illustration of the wise builder (Matthew 7:24-28), because lives, churches and homes have much in common. Flesh and blood, as well as brick and mortar, can stand in splendour on an unsure foundation. To live a good and solid Christian life, we must set it on a solid foundation – the words of Christ, spoken to us through His Sermon on the Mount. By striving to live His word, Jesus Himself becomes the “solid rock” on which our life is built. Life’s storms may blow by, but our life will stand firm, as a permanent fixture in God’s kingdom.

“The Mountain”

“Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him” (Matthew 5:1).

So, where is this mountain?

After leaving his hometown of Nazareth for good, Jesus moved to Capernaum, a town of approximately 1,000-1,500 inhabitants, located on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus stayed at the home of Simon Peter. Capernaum became “home base” for Jesus and His apostles, the centre of all their missionary activity in Galilee.¹

Today, all that remains of Capernaum is a site of excavated ruins. The town was devastated by an earthquake in 749 and remained uninhabited from the 11th century. The ruins of ancient Capernaum were discovered in 1838. Excavations began in 1866; and have been on going to this

¹ Bargil Pixner O.S.B., *With Jesus Through Galilee According to the Fifth Gospel* (Israel: Corazin Publishing, 1992), 33-40.

day. Two of the greatest archeological finds have been: 1) the foundation of Peter's House, within the ruins of a Byzantine Church; and 2) the foundation and ruins of the Synagogue.²

If you are standing amidst the ruins of Capernaum and look south, you will see the Sea of Galilee. The house of Peter was very close to the shoreline. Then, if you look west, you will see a hill, about 3 km away along the norther shore of the Sea of Galilee. This is believed to be the "mountain" where the Sermon on the Mount was delivered by Jesus. Today, this hill is called "The Mount of the Beatitudes." The Scriptures also refer to it as a "solitary" or "uninhabited" place" (*eremos*, in Greek).

The Mount offers a magnificent view over the entire lake and the surrounding villages. The cragginess of this hill meant that it was left uncultivated by farmers, and so, it remained a "solitary" and "uninhabited" place. It provided Jesus with the perfect place³ to gather with his disciples and large crowds around him, without causing damage to farmers.

This "Mount" is quite significant in the ministry of Jesus. Several important things are associated with this site. At the base of the mount, there are seven springs. The water from these springs flows into the Sea of Galilee. This may have been the place where Jesus called his disciples Peter and Andrew (who were fishing from the shore) and John and James (who were mending their nets). This was the place where Jesus went out early in the morning before sunrise to pray (Mark 1:35). The mount was a place where Jesus gathered frequently amidst large crowds to teach and to heal. On one of those occasion, Jesus may have delivered his "Sermon on the Mount." The multiplication of the loaves may have taken place at the base of this mount (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-15). The appearance of the risen Lord along the shore of the lake may have taken place at the base of this mount (John 21:1-24); and the appearance of the risen Lord, as described by Matthew in 28:16-20).

Jesus the Teacher

Jesus began to teach *when he had sat down*. When a Jewish Rabbi was teaching officially he sat to teach. We still speak of a professor's chair and a bishop's chair; the Pope speaks *ex cathedra*, from his seat. Often a Rabbi gave instruction when he was standing or strolling about; but his official teaching was done when he had taken his seat.⁴ So, then, when sits down to teach his disciples, it signifies that what he is about to say is important and official. During the early centuries of Christianity it was customary⁵ for the bishop to deliver his sermon or homily while seated in his chair facing the congregation.

Jesus the Lawgiver

The evangelist Matthew presents the Sermon on the Mount as the New Covenant Law, and the fulfillment of the Old Covenant Law. There are many strong allusions to the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai (Ex 19-24).

At Mount Sinai, the people were not permitted to go up the mountain. They stood at the base of the mountain. God descends upon the mountain. Only Moses (and selected others) were

² Paul J. Achtemeier, General Editor, with the Society of Biblical Literature, *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1985), 154-155.

³ Bargil Pixner O.S.B., *With Jesus Through Galilee According to the Fifth Gospel* (Israel: Corazin Publishing, 1992), p. 37.

⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew: Vol. 1*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 86.

⁵ Peter M.J. Stravinskias, ed. *Our Sunday Visitor's Catholic Encyclopedia* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1991), 182-183.

permitted to go up the mountain, where God spoke only to Moses. The Law began with the Decalogue or Ten Commandments. They are the heart, centre and foundation for the entire Covenant Law. They were written upon stone tablets by God's hand, as a sign that they remain unchangeable. The rest of the Law consisted of the following: further moral laws (based on the Decalogue), dietary laws, civil laws, and laws governing the worship of God. The Covenant between God and His People was then ratified by offering of communion sacrifices. Half of the blood was cast upon the altar, and the other half was sprinkled upon the people (Ex 24:1-11). According to the Fathers of the Church, the Law was given to Moses by God the Father through His Son, the Word of God, the second Person of the Holy Trinity.

At the Mount, near Capernaum, God the Father speak again through His Son. Instead of descending upon the mountain, Jesus, God the Son incarnate, ascends the mountain. The people are permitted to follow him up the mountain to receive the God's revelation. This signifies that the precepts of righteousness that are to be given will be higher, for the precepts given to Israel waiting at the base of the mountain were lower.⁶ On the mountain, God speaks through His Son directly to the people. The Beatitudes are given as the heart, centre and foundation for the New Covenant Law, summarized in the Sermon on the Mount. However, the Ten Commandments and the moral laws remain. They are not abolished, but only fulfilled in Jesus' teaching. The higher precepts are for the kingdom of heaven, the lower precepts were for a kingdom on earth. The New Covenant Law is ratified by one Sacrifice – the Death of Jesus on the Cross and his Resurrection on the third day. We enter this New Covenant with God, through the Mysteries of Baptism and Eucharist, in which we are nourished by the Body and Blood of the Risen Christ.

Living the Beatitudes

“² And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

³ Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

⁵ Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:2-12)

Introduction

The Ten Commandments or Decalogue, which literally means “Ten Words,” were spoken by God to his people on the holy mountain.⁷ They were written with the “finger of God” (Exodus 31:18; Deuteronomy 5:22), unlike the other commandments written by Moses, and so, they are

⁶ Ignatius Catholic Study Bible, 14

⁷ Catechism of the Catholic Church, par. 2056.

unchangeable. The Ten Commandments describe the life and actions a person who has chosen to belong to God. They established a clear boundary based on regulations. If I live by them, I belong to God, his Covenant and his People. If ignore them, I break with God, his covenant promises and his People.

The Beatitudes go open step further. They describe the heart, the attitudes and desires of a person who is in love with God. They describe a righteousness (holiness) that begins from within. If the heart is right (Beatitudes), then right actions will follow (Ten Commandments). Furthermore, they describe the person who has chosen to be a disciple and friend of Christ; and they proclaim the blessings and rewards associated with this discipleship and friendship.

The Beatitudes are at the heart of Jesus' preaching.⁸ They take the promises made to God's chosen people in the Old Testament and fulfill them by ordering⁹ them no longer to an earthly territory or land, but to kingdom of heaven (kingdom of God).

The Beatitudes are really an icon or image of Christ. When we meditate upon them, we come to see the face of Christ,¹⁰ and the mercy and loving-kindness of his heart. To live by the Beatitudes is to imitate Christ, and thus, by God's grace, to become "like Jesus—like God."

The Beatitudes are "Eight" Beautiful Attitudes" that raise the bar (standard) and make it possible to live the Ten Commandments in a deeper and more spiritual way.

When was the last time some thought you were Jesus? Read the introductory story in the book "Rediscover Jesus" by Matthew Kelly.

He opened his mouth and taught them

In Greek, the verb translated as *taught* is not an aorist, but an imperfect and therefore it describes repeated and habitual action. The translation should be "This is what he used to teach them." Matthew is clarifying that the Sermon on the Mount is not just one sermon of Jesus that was given at one particular time and one particular occasion; it is the essence of all that Jesus continuously and habitually taught his disciples.¹¹ The Sermon on the Mount is a summary of Jesus' teaching.

Blessed

"Blessed" (in Greek, *Makarios*) refers to a joy which is serene and untouchable, a joy that is completely independent of all the chances and changes in life. Sometimes the word is translated as "happy," but the word is inadequate. The word "happiness" contains the root "hap" which means chance. Human happiness is something which is dependent on the chances and the changes of life, something which life may give, and which life may also destroy. The Christian blessedness is completely untouchable and unassailable. "No one," said Jesus, "will take your joy from you" (John 16:22). The Beatitudes speak of that joy which seeks us through our pain; that joy which sorrow and loss, pain and grief, are powerless to touch; that joy which sines through tears, and which nothing in life or death can take away.¹²

The term "blessed" is also used here as a declaration that a person has either received a blessing from God or can expect to receive his blessing in the future. It is a declaration of joy or

⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, English translation (New York: Doubleday Publishing, 1995), par. 1716.

⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 1716.

¹⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 1717.

¹¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Volume 1, 89.

¹² *Ibid*, 89.

blessing on the grounds of righteousness before God. The Beatitudes announce that the blessings of the New Covenant will be fully realized when the kingdom comes in its fullness. Some of the beatitudes do promise blessings that are partly enjoyed in this life, but all of them look beyond the struggles and hardships of this life to the eternal blessedness of the life to come.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus astonishes his hearers. He applies the declaration of “blessedness” to situations far beyond what the world considered good.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven

The word used here for *poor* is the word *ptochos*. In Greek, there are two words for poor. There is the word *penes*, which describes a person who works for a living, lives in a simple home, owns basic necessities, and makes enough money to live from day to day. He is not rich, nor is he destitute. This kind of person, although economically poor and with no influence or power, can still be very much “self-reliant” or “self-dependent.” The word *ptochos* describes a person who has nothing at all, someone who is totally destitute, living to absolute and abject poverty. So, this beatitude is saying: “Blessed are those who in spirit (in their hearts) consider themselves to be absolutely destitute.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the words *ani* and *ebion* are used to describe a humble person who, because he has no earthly resources, influence or power, puts all his trust in God. In the Psalms, the poor man is a good man, dear to God. “God delivers the poor” (Psalm 35:10). “The hope of the poor shall not perish for ever” (Psalm 9:18). “This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles” (Psalm 34:6).

Although the Gospel of Luke omits the words “in spirit” and simply states “Blessed are the poor,” the meaning in both Gospels is the same. The first beatitude simply states: “Blessed in the man who has realized his own utter helplessness, and who has put his whole trust in God.”

When a person realizes his own utter helplessness, and has put all his trust in God, two things happen. First, the person becomes *detachment from things*, for he knows that things acquired are not the source of happiness or security. Second, the person becomes *attached to God*, for he knows that God alone can bring him help, hope, strength and consolation. The person who is “poor” (Luke) or “poor in spirit” (Matthew) is the person who realizes that all things mean nothing, and that God means everything.

It is important to note that this beatitude is not identifying material poverty as a good thing. Material poverty is not a good thing. Living in slums under unhealthy conditions, not having enough to eat and not having access to clean water is not a state of blessedness. The Gospel seeks to eliminate that kind of poverty.

This beatitude contradicts the general attitude of the world, which believes that happiness comes with wealth, possessions, influence, power, self-reliance, independence and personal freedom.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

When do we mourn or grieve? When we have lost someone precious and dear to us – a parent, a spouse, a brother or sister, a relative or good friend. The death of a loved one is the greatest source of our mourning or grieving. The loss of a friendship or good relationship can also be the reason for our grief and mourning. We can also mourn or grieve when we have lost our close friendship with God, when our relationship with Him was suffered because of grave sin or lack of

prayer. The Greek word used here for *mourn* is the strongest word for mourning in the Greek language. It is the word used for mourning at the death of a loved one.

Some of this blessing is experience during our life on earth; most of it is reserved for the age to come.

When we ask, God does provide us with grace in our most difficult times. He provides the strength, the peace and the consolation that we need. After Confession or Holy Communion, or in prayer – we may also receive special blessings when our sins are forgiven, our relationship with God is restored, and when we experience a new beginning.

The fullness of this blessing will take place in the kingdom of God when we are re-united with our love ones and dwell in the presence of God for ever.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

In modern English, nowadays, the word *meek* carries with it an idea of ineffectiveness, subservience, shyness, spinelessness or lack of courage. The original word—in Greek *praus*—meant something very different.¹³

The work here refers to someone who is *gentle yet firm, humble, self-controlled, possesses inner strength to restrain inappropriate anger and discouragement in the midst of adversity, recognizes his own weakness and ignorance*. In the end, the “meek” shall inherit the earth (or the land [Psalm 37:11]). This may refer to heaven itself, envisioned as the new Promised Land or the kingdom of God (the new age to come).

This beatitude goes against the general precept of the world, that earth and land is conquered by force and aggression, power and wealth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (holiness) are those who yearn to live rightly, according to the will of God. In the Greek, the desire is not for a “part” of righteousness, but for “all of it.”

The blessing and rewards associated with this beatitude are experienced in this life and in the life to come. Jesus promises that those who make the Lord’s kingdom and his righteousness their main priority in life (6:33), God will provide all that is needed in this life (food, drink, clothing, home, security, etc.). God provides for those who trust him (6:11). Those who seek his kingdom and righteousness will be satisfied – in this life and in the age to come.

One of the greatest attributes of God is His holiness or righteousness (absolute perfection). His holiness is so great that all the Powers and Virtues tremble before Him and lose themselves in unending adoration, singing, “Holy, Holy, Holy...” God pours out His holiness upon the Church of God and upon every person who desires it, to the degree they hunger and thirst for it (“ask and you shall receive” [7:7]).

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

¹³ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 1, 96.

An important attribute of God is His justice. His justice is so great and penetrating that it reaches deep into the heart of things, and all things stand before Him in naked truth, and nothing can withstand Him.¹⁴ However, the greatest attribute of God is His love and mercy. It unites the creature with the Creator. This immense love and abyss of mercy are made know in the Incarnation of the Word and in the Redemption of humanity. God wants us to approach Him through His mercy and love, which always seeks for the opportunity to forgive. If a person refuses, then he must approach God through His justice.

“Whatever Jesus did, He did well. He went along doing good. His manner was full of goodness and mercy. His steps were guided by compassion. Towards his enemies He showed goodness, kindness, and understanding, and to those in need help and consolation.”¹⁵ This beatitude calls us to imitate Jesus.

Those who imitate Jesus by being merciful and extending forgiveness to others, being patient and understanding in bearing the faults of others, will themselves receive God’s mercy and forgiveness.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Those who act with integrity and serve the Lord unselfishly. In biblical terms, the heart is the hidden centre of the person where one’s thoughts, words, actions, and emotions are said to originate. A pure heart is undefiled by evil and lustful thoughts and finds its true treasure in heaven.

In eternity the pure in heart will see God as the angels do even now.

The “sixth sense” is the *nous*, the spirit or heart of the soul. With five senses communicate with the visible world. The *nous* belongs to the spiritual world. It is the “eye” by which we shall see God. This eye is currently blinded. However, it remains as the place (the inner room) where we are united with the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. As the heart is purified by the Holy Spirit, we already begin to “see God,” in everywhere, in every place and situation of our life.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Those who sow peace in the world. Partly, this means striving to live at peace with others. Ultimately, it means sharing the gospel so that others can be reconciled with God and live in the peace of Christ.

The Holy Spirit gives peace to those who imitate Christ. Thus, peacemakers share God’s peace with those around them, imitating Christ’s sacrificial love and participating in His work. By God’s grace, peacemakers become sons of God themselves.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

To purify a soul, God uses whatever instruments He likes. There are times when our good actions and best intentions are misinterpreted by others. We are then persecuted by harsh criticism, unkind words, coldness, disrespect, mockery or rejection. This is a type of suffering that

¹⁴ Sister M. Faustina, *Divine Mercy in My Soul: Diary* (Stockbridge, Massachusetts: Marian Press, 1987), par. 180.

¹⁵ Sister M. Faustina, *Divine Mercy in My Soul*, par. 1175.

can be very painful; but God allows it, and it is important to accept it. By accepting it, we allow God to prepare us for the kingdom of heaven, and we grow in our likeness to Him.

Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.

This beatitude refers to those who are slandered, abused, or oppressed for their public witness to Jesus Christ and Christianity. They are targets of the world's hatred, because of their faithfulness to the Lord Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, and the righteousness of His gospel. Persecuted disciples can expect a great reward in the coming kingdom of God.

Be Salt and Light

These two illustrations are given after the Beatitudes and before the commentary on God's moral laws. Those who observe both become salt and light.

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men.

¹⁴ You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵ Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:13-16)

In the ancient world, salt was highly valued.

Salt was associated with *purity*. Its' whiteness made that association easy. The Romans said that salt was the purest of all things because it came from the purest of all things, the sun and the sea. Salt was one of the most primitive of all offerings to gods, and to the end of the day the Jewish sacrifices were offered with salt.¹⁶ So, if a Christian is the salt of the earth, he must be an example of purity and self-sacrifice.

In the ancient world, salt was the commonest of all preservatives. It was used to keep things from going bad. If a Christian is to be the salt of the earth, he must have a positive influence on life, preserving society by defeating corruption, and making it easier for others to be good.

The greatest and most obvious quality of salt is that it gives flavour to things. Food without salt is bland. Christianity is to life what salt is to food. It is meant to lend flavour to life.

¹⁶ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 1, 119

Being the salt of the earth, Christians are to preserve and season the world by their example of purity, love and self-sacrifice.

Of one thing the Jews were very sure—no man kindled his own light. Jerusalem was indeed to be a light to the Gentiles “set on a hill,” but only “God lit Israel’s lamp.” The light itself was God’s presence, justice and truth. The same applies to the Christian disciple, who serves as a lamp. The light that shines is the presence of Christ within the heart. The Christian life of a disciple is something to be seen, to be witnessed. There is no such thing as secret discipleship. Our Christian faith is not meant to be part of life, but to permeate every aspect of our life. We are called to witness to Christ and his gospel message: at work, in a restaurant, in school, in the kitchen, and on the playing field. By allowing Jesus to radiate, the life of a Christian in the world becomes a good example for others to follow, a warning, and a light that guides to the knowledge of truth.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls God “Father” a total of 17 times (Mt 5-7).

Living the Moral Law

¹⁷ “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt 5:17-20)

The Jews used the expression The Law to refer to several different things. 1) First, they used it to refer to the Ten Commandments. 2) They used it to refer to the first five books of the Bible, *The Pentateuch*, which literally means *The Five Rolls*. 3) They used it to mean the *Oral* or *Scribal Law*.¹⁷

The Law and the Prophets is an expression that was used to refer to the entire Old Testament. Jesus fulfills both the Mosaic Law (all that Moses commanded in the first five books) and all the OT prophecies. He “makes complete” the Mosaic Law. This can mean two things: Jesus’ teachings refine the understanding of the OT Law; Jesus himself, is the only human being to follow the entire OT Law faithfully, in all its entirety. In the life of Jesus, all the prophecies of the OT are fulfilled.

The Law consisted of the following: moral laws (Ten Commandments, etc.); dietary laws; civil laws; and worship laws. With the New Covenant, the moral laws are retained and refined by Jesus.

Jesus acts with authority to perfect and deepen the moral codes of the Mosaic Law. Jesus cites the OT Law, saying, “you have heard that it was said,” and responds with the refrain, “But I say to you.” The pattern underscores Jesus’ authority as a new Moses and the lawgiver of the New Covenant.

Thou Shalt Not Murder (Kill)

¹⁷ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 1, 127.

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.’ ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be liable to the hell of fire.²³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Make friends quickly with your accuser, while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison; ²⁶ truly, I say to you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny.” (Matthew 5:21-26).

Jesus reaffirms the Fifth Commandment, “You shall not kill” (Ex 20:13; Deut. 5:17). However, he introduces a new dimension by “raising the bar” or “expanding the boundary.” The commandment not only forbids acts of murder (intentional homicide, abortion, euthanasia, suicide), but it also forbids any form of “character assassination” caused by inappropriate anger, insults, slander, hatred, and unforgiveness.

Every human being has three kinds of life: spiritual life (life with God): physical life; and social life (our good name). By a single stroke of his tongue the slanderer commits three murders. He kills his own soul (spiritual life), the soul of anyone who hears him, and takes away the social life (good name) of the person he slanders.¹⁸

To fulfill this commandment, Jesus is asking that we be attentive to our heart. If inappropriate anger arises, deal with it properly, so as not to sin. “Be angry, but do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger” (Ephesians 4:26). St. Francis de Sales gives this advice: “Beware of falsely imputing crimes and sins to your neighbour, revealing his secret sins, exaggerating those that are manifest, putting an evil interpretation on his good works, denying the good that you know belongs to someone, maliciously concealing it or lessening it by words. You would offend God in all these ways but most of all by false accusations and denying the truth to your neighbour’s harm. It is a double sin to lie and harm your neighbour at the same time.”¹⁹

Hatred, resentment and unforgiveness rob our good deeds of their spiritual value. When participating in the Divine Liturgy, we should be at peace with everyone. If not, then within our heart resolve to forgive and to let know, then continue with our prayer.

Jesus confirms that one day we will be accountable for everything. Sin takes place first in the heart before it becomes manifest in word and action. “But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment” (Matthew 12:36). We all fall short and need to seek God’s mercy and forgiveness. Resolve things in this life. If not, we will need to resolve them in Purgatory.

Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your

¹⁸ St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, trans. by John Ryan (New York: Image Books, 1972), 202.

¹⁹ St. Frances de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, 202.

right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

³¹ **“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³² But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”** (Matthew 5:27-32).

Jesus reaffirms the Sixth Commandment, “You shall not commit adultery” (Ex 20:14; Deut. 5:18). However, Jesus expands the borders of our understanding and “raises the bar” in the battle for purity and the virtue of chastity. The goal is not to make us guilty, but to raise our awareness.

*To fulfill this commandment, Jesus is asking that we be attentive to our heart. That’s where the battle takes place. One of the consequences of the fall is our inclination towards evil, referred to as three-fold *concupiscence*: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and pride of life. If we given in to lustful desires, thoughts and imagination, if we expose ourselves to pornography, we already commit “spiritual adultery” within the heart. If “spiritual adultery” continues unchecked, it ends with physical adultery, fornication, masturbation or acts of homosexuality.*

Jesus says, “if your right eye cause to you sin, pluck it out and throw it away.” This is a figure of speech, a figurative overstatement to make a point, and not a literal command for self-mutilation. What Jesus is saying is that we should take sexual sins seriously, and extreme measures are needed to avoid occasions of sin and the sins themselves.

Divorce and remarriage were permitted under the Old Covenant only because of Israel’s sinfulness and hardness of heart. In the New Covenant, with the help of grace, marriage is to be restored to God’s original plan – an indissoluble communion of love.

Concerning Oaths

³³ **“Again you have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.”** (Matthew 5:33-37).

Jesus re-affirms the OT moral laws concerning oaths. “When a man vows a vow to the Lord or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word” (Numbers 30:2). “When you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not be slack to pay it; for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and it would be sin in you” (Deuteronomy 23:21,22).

Public oaths are important for the good of society. Judges, doctors, soldiers, politicians, and other professionals swear oaths for public service. Oaths are also sworn to make or renew covenants. In every context, God’s holy name is invoked to bring divine assistance (blessing).

What Jesus is forbidding is the practice of making private oaths, for private purposes. In Jesus’ day, people made private oaths for personal advantage. By invoking something other than God’s name (heaven, earth, Jerusalem), oaths were taken lightly or even disregarded. Jesus denounces this, teaching that truthfulness and integrity should govern private life. Matthew recounts three

episodes where such illicit oaths are sworn for personal purposes (14:7; 26:72, 74; 27:25). (See CCC 2153-54).

Disciples of Jesus need not make private oaths, for God sees everything and knows everything. Every promise or word should be given with honesty, truthfulness and integrity. The promise or word of a Christian should be trustworthy (because Jesus is trustworthy). Every disciple of Jesus is obligated to follow through with his personal promises without making oaths. Our answer to people's requests should be clear in every situation, and trustworthy: "Yes," means yes; and "No," means no. Clear commitment and no ambiguity. Answers such as "maybe" or "possibly" should not be used.

Retribution Laws

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹ But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; ⁴⁰ and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; ⁴¹ and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴² Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you." (Matthew 5:38-42)

Jesus forbids the misuse of the Mosaic civil law to justify private vengeance or revenge. Exodus 21:24 was meant to impose just retribution; it was never an invitation to inflict punishment for personal injuries or extend personal vengeance beyond the injury suffered (cf. Lev 24:20; Deut. 19:21). The punishment had to fit the crime (just retribution) but not exceed it. Jesus eliminates such a policy of retaliation from personal life (cf. Romans 12:17).

Roman soldiers in NT Palestine reserved the right to recruit and compel Jews into temporary service. Simon of Cyrene was forced under this custom to carry Jesus' cross in 27:32. Jesus calls for ungrudging generosity beyond the required call of duty.

Love Your Neighbour and Your Enemy

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you, 'Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you,' ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:43-48)

In the OT Law, we find this command: "¹⁷ "You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. ¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance, nor bear a grudge against the children of your people, but you shall *love your neighbour* as yourself: I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:17-18).

Some Jews held a very narrow interpretation of *neighbour* in this verse, restricting it only to one's fellow Israelite. In the OT Law, we find no command to hate one's enemy or the enemies of God. "Hate your enemy" is probably a reference to Israel's warfare with the Gentiles in Canaan.

Because they worshipped false gods, they were enemies of God and His People. Moses thus called Israel to exterminate them under Joshua and the Judges, lest Israel imitate their idolatry. Against this background, Jesus counters Jewish disdain for Gentiles who continue to live in Palestine. He broadens the message of neighbour to include Gentiles, even their Roman persecutors. The Father's impartial treatment of all people is the model for Christian mercy.²⁰

Jesus advocates moral righteousness higher than the Old Covenant. He raises the standard. Just as Israel was to imitate God in being "holy" (Lev 19:3), so Jesus calls the Church to imitate God's perfect compassion and mercy (Luke 6:36). The Father is kind and merciful to the good and evil alike, so his children must extend mercy even to their enemies.

Three-Way Service: Almsgiving, Prayer and Fasting

The Virtue of Piety

¹ "Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 6:1)

Every virtue is simply a good habit. Piety is the habit of doing good works: prayer, almsgiving and acts of mercy, fasting. True piety is driven by the desire to do everything with love, reverence and obedience to God. False piety is motivated by a desire to attract public attention, approval and respect.

Jesus reaffirms three traditional works of mercy honoured by the Jews (cf. Tb 12:8-10): almsgiving; prayer and fasting. However, he warns against performing them for public esteem.

Almsgiving

² Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (Matthew 6:2-4)

To the Jews, almsgiving ranked as the supreme act of piety. Giving to the needy, said the teachers of the law, was better than sacrifice. When Jesus arrived on the scene He didn't dispute this, but He added a qualifier. More important than giving, said Jesus, was the motive that prompted the giving. He knew the base motives in people's hearts and recognized that even good deeds could be done for bad reasons.

Some people give out of guilt; some give out of a sense of superiority. A friend asks us to contribute to his favourite cause and we feel guilty if we don't. When we help someone, we may picture ourselves as reaching down to help them up. Charity can infuse us with a sense of superiority.

Whether we give out of feelings of guilt, superiority, or for some other reason, most of us want some recognition for our generosity. But if we call attention to our giving, Jesus warned, that attention is all the reward we are going to get. Jesus said of the trumpet-blowing Pharisees, "They have received their reward in full." This phrase comes from an expression used in ancient Greek commerce. Archaeologists have found it scribbled on papyri identified as receipts and have concluded that it meant "paid in full."

²⁰ RSV Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: New Testament, 2nd Ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 17.

If we give to be seen by others or to be applauded by others, we have been paid in full. If we want the praise of others, we can have it; but then God owes us nothing.

If we want recognition from God, however, we should give quietly, not letting our left hand know what our right hand is doing. Then our Father, who sees what we do in secret and knows our motives, will reward us. Good deeds cannot merit more than one payout—if we get our reward from men we will not receive from God.

Hypocrites – refers to “actors or “stage players.” Jesus may have certain scribes and Pharisees in mind who perform outward devotions to be seen and praised by men. The exercise of one’s faith can be public, so long as it flows from proper intentions.

Keeping things in context (see Matthew 5:13-16)

To avoid misinterpretation, this teaching needs to be kept in the context of Matthew 5:13-17, where Jesus calls us to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Jesus was not opposed to having people know about the actions of His followers. Such things cannot always be kept secret or confidential. His concern was that recognition was not His people’s motives for giving. He did not want them doing righteous acts for unrighteous reasons.

If we want public acknowledgment for our righteous acts, we have missed the point of Jesus’ message in Matthew 6. This applies to our praying as well as our giving.

Prayer

⁵ “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁷ And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” (Mt 6:5-8)

Prayer was important in the Jewish religion as it is in the Christian faith. When Jews awoke in the morning the first thing they did was pray what was called the *Shema*: “The Lord our God, He alone is God... (See Deuteronomy 6:4-5). At the end of the day, as the sun was setting, they repeated this petition. The Jews also had set times to pray during the day: at 9:00 am, at 12:00 noon, and at 3:00 pm. They also had specific prayers for different occasions. Every meal began with a prayer of blessing (benediction) together with the breaking of bread. They prayed a certain prayer when they entered a home, when they saw the sea, and when they viewed a river. They prayed a certain prayer when they entered a city, when they left a city, and when they bought new furniture.

The danger with established customs or traditions is that prayer can become a *thoughtless routine*, without any feelings or affects. For example, have you ever recited your prayers and were then then unable to remember what you said or what you prayed for? This is something that can happen to everyone. Prayer can become something we go through as a thoughtless and emotionless routine in our daily lives. This is the first temptation when it comes to prayer – *thoughtless and emotionless routine*.

The second temptation with respect to prayer is the desire to be noticed. Prayer in public can turn into a performance, where we hope that others will notice us and admire our piety,

prayerfulness and devotion to God. Again, it is important to keep things in context. Jesus is not against praying in public. However, when we do, it needs to be sincere and free from any selfish motivation. Frequent spiritual inventory or examination of our conscience (checking our heart and our intentions) – is an absolute necessity!

When we pray, Jesus recommends that we “go into our room, shut the door, and pray to our Father who is in secret.” How do we interpret this? There are two ways. First, that part of our prayers be done privately, spending time with God alone. However, even in private prayer, alone in our room, we are not totally free from the temptation of being noticed... Second, Jesus is asking us to go into our inner room, i.e. the heart, and to pray always from our heart. If we do this, our prayer will involve our mind, our affections, our whole being. When we pray from the heart, we forget about where we are and who is around us. All showmanship disappears. All thoughtless and emotionless routine also disappears.

Fasting

¹⁶ “And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Mt 6:16-18)

Importance of fasting. Jews fasted twice a week, on Monday and on Thursday. This might have had something to do with the fact that Monday and Thursday were market days when people came to town.

Traditionally, the pious Jew covered his head with ashes when he was fasting and donned a garment of sackcloth. Again, Jesus warned that our intentions for fasting be free from showmanship and the desire to attract attention or admiration.

Summary

Giving, praying and fasting – are ways in which we honour God and serve others. They are works of charity done for the good of others or for the strengthening of our own spiritual life.

Religion is not a performance; it is faithfulness of a Person. Devotion is not acted out for display or applause.

Pray Like This....

⁹ Pray then like this:

Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.

¹⁰ Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread;

¹² And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors;

¹³ And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

¹⁴ For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” (Mt 6:9-15)

The “Our Father” is the prayer *par excellence, the model and foundation for all prayer*. According to Tertullian, one of the Fathers of the Church, it is the summary of the whole gospel.²¹ Given by God’s Son, it is part of the family inheritance of God’s children. It has seven petitions and can be divided into two parts: the first part glorifies God (three petitions); and the second part petitions God about human needs. All other prayers are simply commentary on the Lord’s Prayer.

The first three petitions glorify God. They concern God’s name and kingdom and will and focus on our Father. The next seven petitions are about human needs: bread, forgiveness, and temptation centre on His family.

The whole of life is captured in the rainbow of these requests. “Great things, small things, spiritual things and material things, inward things and outward things—there is nothing that is not included in this prayer” (Helmut Thielicke).

All prayers are simply “commentary” on the Lord’s Prayer. St. Augustine writes: “Run through all the words of the holy prayers, and I do not think that you will find anything in them that is not contained and included in the Lord’s Prayer.”²²

Our Father

Jesus may have taught this prayer in Aramaic, a language related to ancient Hebrew and in common usage among first-century Jews. In this case, Jesus would have addressed the Father as “Abba,” an affectionate title.

According to Jesus, when we come to the God of the universe in prayer, we can address Him affectionately as *Father*. Bound up in the word *Father* is a compact summary of the entire Christian faith. When Christians bow before God and call Him Father, they are acknowledging that at the heart of the universe is not only ultimate power but ultimate love.

But not everyone can call God *Father*. It was Jesus who taught us to pray that way. He alone guaranteed that we can enter into a relationship with God and become members of His family. The relationship that a creature has with His Creator is not the relationship of a Father to His children, which is our link with God through Jesus Christ.

In Old Testament, the Israelites did not individually address God as “Father.” As far as we know, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David or Daniel did not dare address God that way. (If the word *Father* was used, it was used in general, referring to the nation of Israel. God was “Father” to as his first son, from all the nations.

Yet in the New Testament, God is called Father at least 275 times, and that is now we are instructed to speak to Him. All that a good father wants to be to his children, God will be to Christians who approach Him in prayer. We can pray as children. Why? Because through Baptism, God the Father has adopted us as His children in His only Son. In the early Church, the prayer was taught only to those who were already baptized.

In Hebrew thought, a name was extremely significant. Choosing a name involved a lot of prayer. Parents chose names for their children hoping that the name would embody the personality, characteristics, or character that they wanted to see develop in the child.

²¹ Tertullian, *De orat.* 1:PL 1, 1155

²² St. Augustine, *Ep.* 130, 12,22: PL 33, 503.

- a. Jesus changed the name of Simon to Peter (Cephas), which means “rock.” The name change was a sign of his conversion and growth in spiritual life.
- b. Catholics and Orthodox Christians – gave names of saints to their children, so that they might grow to imitate the virtues of their patron saints, becoming “like them.”
- c. Early Puritans in America gave daughters names like Charity, Hope, Love and Patience. They hoped that their child, as she grew to womanhood, would live up to her name.
- d. Pope John Paul II – chose his name because he wanted his life to embody the Evangelist John (close to Mary), the Apostle Paul (travelling missionary), and his predecessors Pope John XXII and Pope Paul VI.

In the Old Testament, when Moses asks for God’s name, God replies: “**I Am.**” God is “The One Who Is.” In the New Testament, God wants us to address Him as “**Father.**” This is the name that He reveals.

The address “Our Father” not only recognizes the intimacy that we have with God our Father, it also speaks of the awe we have should have as we come to Him in prayer.

Who Art in Heaven

First, the phrase “who art in heaven” reminds us that God is everywhere present. The Holy Scriptures refer to three heavens. The first heaven is the air and the sky above the earth (the atmosphere). The second heaven is the space above, the universe. The third heaven is the realm of the invisible world, where God dwells upon His heavenly throne, worshipped and exalted by myriads of bodiless spirits. In Baptism, the human heart becomes an image of this third heaven. When the gift of the Holy Spirit is received, the Most Holy Trinity comes to dwell within, and the heart becomes God’s throne, an image of the heavenly world. When we pray, “Who Art in Heaven,” we are reminded that Our Father is present everywhere, enthroned in heaven and in my heart. When I call upon Him, he always hears me.

The phrase also refers to God’s elevation above all, His majesty as King. Jesus was saying that “The God Most High” to whom we pray to as “Father” is the sovereign majesty of the universe. He is the “Lord and King” of all creation; the God of all power, and the God of all authority.

For early Jewish Christians, having a proper awe of God as “Lord and King” was probably easier than understanding their intimacy with God. Unfortunately, in our day the pendulum was swung to the other extreme. God is often referred to in terms that are anything but awe-inspiring.

The Bible keeps the tension between intimacy and awe in our thinking about God. God is our Father, but He is also the King of the Universe. The author of Hebrews said, “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Heb 4:16). The fact that we come to a throne should fill us with awe. But because it is a throne of grace, it is approachable.

If our Father in heaven knows what we need before we ask, why should we come at all? Is prayer necessary? The sincere cry, “Our Father,” may in itself be all that prayer needs, because we are expressing a relationship of trust and dependence, awe and intimacy. Prayer is not primarily getting things from God but talking with Him.

Being a person is something we hold in common with God, and persons can relate to each other. If a husband and wife are not talking with each other, it is a dead relationship. If a home

has become nothing more than a filling station, family life is sterile. Spouses and families need communication and so does every person with God.

The purpose of prayer is primarily to voice to God the priorities of our lives and the needs of our soul. When we talk with Him heart to heart and mind to mind, we affirm our love for each other. Out of communication comes communion.

Hallowed Be Thy Name

“I will show Myself holy among those who are near me, and before all the people I will be glorified... You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy” (Lev 10:3, 19:2).

God’s holiness refers to His absolute perfection. He is set apart, totally “other,” unlike anything else,” totally perfect in every way, and without even a trace of sin. No one can compare to Him. God’s holiness pervades His entire being and all His divine attributes. His love is a *holy love*, His mercy is *holy mercy*, and His justice is *holy justice*.

By the words “hallowed be Thy name” we confess that God alone is holy.²³ His holiness (absolute perfection) is so great that all the Powers and Virtues tremble before Him. They veil their faces and worship Him in unending adoration, singing: “Holy, Holy, Holy...”

At the same time, we ask that God the Father pour forth His holiness upon His children, so that we might become partakers of His sanctity, and “be holy and blameless before Him” (Ephesians 1:4).

Finally, we pray that all people recognize the holiness of God, that they might honour His Name, and glorify Him with respect and reverence.

Thy Kingdom Come

What is the Kingdom of God? – It is the final messianic age that is to come, the “Seventh Day” (Gen 2:23), in which God rests. All is finished, perfected (made holy) and submitted to God and His reign. The final day (age) begins in light and never ends.

Is the Kingdom of God already here? – *Yes and No.* The kingdom of God was “brought near” with the Incarnation. Jesus proclaimed the good news during His earthly ministry: the kingdom of God is near (the kingdom of God is at hand). The kingdom of God begins with the death and Resurrection of Christ. In the Eucharist, it is present in our midst. The kingdom of God will come in its fullness when the Lord Jesus returns in glory.

Jesus arose on the “first day” of the week (Sunday), which can also be referred to as the “eighth day.” The kingdom of God begins with His resurrection (“one” signifies a beginning); and His kingdom will have no end (“eight” signifies eternity).

In the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy kingdom come” refers primarily to the final coming of the reign of God through Christ’s return (Titus 2:13).

At the same time, however, we are asking God to reign as King in our own heart. We want His control in our lives today.

Finally, we are praying that God may rule as King over the hearts of all men and women.

²³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Our Pascha*, par. 677.

Thy Will be done, on earth as it is in heaven

Praying of God's Will to be done provides a foundation for all our own personal prayers and petitions. We are basically asking for God's will to be done in our lives and in the world.

So, prayer is not about conforming God's Will to our will, or wishes and desires, but conforming our will, to God's Will, His plan and desires. Prayer here is not about changing God's mind and heart, but about changing our mind and heart.

We are often tempted to treat God as a "genie in a lamp." If we rub the lamp and make a wish, we expect to be granted what we want.

It's all about confirming our will to God's Will.

Prayer here is not about getting God to do *my will*. Prayer is asking for *God's Will* to be done in my life, my family, my business, and my relationships and in the world, as it is done in heaven.

For us to do God's will on earth as it is in heaven, we must go against the current. When we pray "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," we are praying for our friends, our families, our society, but above all for ourselves. We willingly abandon our will to His unconquerable will.

Give us this day, our daily bread

Jesus is just talking about food. He is speaking about our "daily needs."

We cannot serve His kingdom and do His will unless we have the strength we need for today. So, it is proper to ask God for a job to earn money for food. It is appropriate to turn to God for the clothes we need to work on the job to earn money for food. It is also valid to ask for transportation to get us to the job so that we may earn the bread. God knows our needs, and He is concerned about them.

First, the word *bread* refers to the food that sustains our bodies. Our Father in heavens concerns Himself with the items on our grocery list. Food for our next meal matters to Him.

Second, the word *bread* refers to all that we must have to live.

Third, the word *bread* refers to the spiritual food that sustains our spiritual with Him.

The focus of the request is for *daily* bread. The word *daily*, however, is misleading translation of the Greek *epiousios*, which literally means "above the essence" or "superstantial."

The word *epiousios* bewildered scholars for centuries. The Lord's Prayer is the only place that the word occurred inside and outside the Bible. Then a few years ago an archeologist dug up a papyrus fragment that contained a housewife's shopping list. Next to several items the woman has scribbled this word for *daily*. It probably meant "enough for the coming day." The phrase should be translated, "Give us today bread enough for tomorrow." When prayed in the morning, it is a prayer for the needs in the hours ahead. Prayed in the evening, it is a request for the needs of the coming day. The implication is of course, that God will supply whatever we need to honour Him and do His will.

Jesus did not invite us to ask for everything in a store catalogue, or for an expensive vehicle, shoes or clothing. Pray for bread—the necessities of life, not the luxuries. Ask for bread, not cake. Nor are we invited to request supplies for years to come. We are to ask for the essentials to take us through the day (tomorrow).

Note that when we pray this petition, we are also asking for others and well as ourselves. If I pray this prayer in sincerity, it delivers me from selfishness and hoarding. If the Father supplies

me with two loaves and my brother or sister with none, I understand that God has indeed answered our prayers. My extra loaf is not for storing, but for sharing.

God wants us to be free. We can bring our small requests to God. We can place before Him our need for bread, a coat, a pair of shoes—all those items that matter to us. If we need them, then they matter to our heavenly Father as well.

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us

“Forgive” follows “give,” and Jesus links the two petitions. In that way when we think of our need for food, we will recognize our need for pardon as well. Also, as we confess our guilt, we consider how we have handled our relationships with others.

In Luke 11, the prayer is “to forgive us our sins” (v. 4). The petition in Matthew 6 is “to forgive us our debts” (v. 12) recognizes that sin is not only deliberate disobedience but also a debt. It is a debt we owe to God, which Jesus Christ has paid.

St. Augustine labelled this request for forgiveness “the terrible petition,” because if we harbour an unforgiving spirit while we pray to be forgiven in the same way as we forgive others, we are actually asking God not to forgive us.

Think of how the confession of sins works. If I honestly pray for forgiveness, then I revise my estimate of myself downward and I admit my own guilt. If I see the pollution of my own life, then I see the sins of others in a different light. Without that, I can regard myself as so important, so dignified, so honourable that it would be unthinkable to forgive anyone who dared offend someone as righteous as I. That is self-righteousness. To squeeze pardon from a self-righteous person is harder than squeezing apple juice from a stone slat. It’s simply not in such a person to forgive.

If we honestly know God as our Father, then we are part of the “forgiving fellowship.” Although at times we may find it difficult to forgive someone who has wronged us, we cannot help but see an individual offense as trivial in comparison to our sin against God. When we forgive others, it is evidence that we have entered into God’s forgiveness. Men and women who live in the relief of God’s pardon find it easier to forgive those who offend them.

We are never more aware of God’s grace than when we admit our sin and cry out for pardon. We are never more like God than when, for Christ’s sake, we extend forgiveness fully and freely to those who have sinned against us.

And lead us not into temptation

We are really praying “Keep me away from temptation.” We are recognizing that God has the power to lead us past all the lures to sin that threaten us. Therefore, we ask, “If the opportunity to sin presents itself, grant that I will not have the desire. If the desire springs up within me, grant that I will not have the opportunity.”

We are surrounded by ten thousand seductions to live life apart from God, In our ambitions and in our successes, we are tempted to: honour our own names, to build our own kingdoms, to take credit for making a good living and supplying for all our needs, and to deny our need from forgiving grace. The enemy of our souls wants us to cast away from God.

But deliver us from evil (the evil one).

In this final petition we recognize Satan's power, admit our weaknesses, and plead for the greater power of God.

Satan is the fallen angel and adversary of God. The petition is also projected into the future: Christians pray for God's deliverance in the final days, when the devil will be destroyed (Rev 20:10).

Wealth and Possessions

¹⁹ “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (Matthew 6:19-21)

The Sadducees was sect within Judaism that believed that there is no afterlife. This is it. So, wealth in this life, according to them, was a reward for righteousness. If you live a good and godly life, God will reward you with health, happiness and wealth. Wealth and possessions are a reward for righteousness. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches that this is not true.

What is Jesus saying?

Is Jesus saying that we are not to have bank accounts and save money? Is Jesus telling us not to make investments for the future? Of course not.

We need to interpret this verse in the context of the Holy Scriptures. St. Paul endorses the principle that parents save for their children (2 Corinthians 12:14). Proverbs laud the lesson of the ant who stores for the future (Proverbs 6:6). The Bible also acknowledges the right to have private property. The eighth commandment about not stealing has no meaning unless someone owns something to steal. Peter rebukes Ananias and Sapphira for lying, not for possessing property. He said that their land and the money they received from selling it were always at their disposal (Acts 5:4).

Jesus neither condemned saving nor did he ask everyone he met to give all their possessions away. He warned about storing up our goods when our motives were to find our security in our possessions. Jesus is warning us not become attached to our wealth and possessions, believing them to be the source of our security and happiness in life.

Background

In the first century banks did not exist, so people saved their money in three ways.

One was by hoarding garments. A cache of fine garments was as good as money in the bank. They could be sold in the future.

A second way of accumulating wealth was to store grain in barns. Famine was an ever-present reality in the ancient world of the Near East because of undependable rains. If a man could store his grain until a famine came and prices soared, he could become fabulously wealthy.

The third method of saving was to exchange assets for gold. Instead of locking it in a bank vault, however, they hid it in a pot or buried it in a field.

Jesus pointed to the ways rich people held their possessions and warned them that there were no fully “safe investments.” For moths, beautiful garments make a splendid menu, and garments with holes become a lost investment. Grain could be eaten by rodents or damaged by disease. Thieves can steal gold by breaking in, or more literally “digging in” to a home. In fact, thieves in

the first century we called diggers. The Palestinian homes were made of baked clay, so a burglar broke in by digging a hole in a wall. People may think their garments, grain and gold appear secure, but moths, mice, and marauders can demonstrate that earth has no secure investments.

In today's world, people may think that their money, investments, stocks, bonds, and property are secure, but nothing is full secure. Investments, stocks and bonds are at the mercy of a changing market and economic down-turns. Inflation, like a rat, can nibble away at a bank account. Currency is devalued. Houses, buildings, businesses, boats, and cars are all subject to fire, damage by natural disasters, depreciation and rust. Even land can lose its value with one chemical spill. In the end, we leave everything behind. Only short-sighted investors build their portfolios on this earth.

Equities built up in heaven are more secure and bring better dividends. In the context of the Sermon on the Mount, those who give to the needy are supporting God's work in the world. What we invest in people remains, because people are eternal.

Origen, one of the fathers of the Church, described Christians as being "money changers," taking the capital of earth and changing it for the currency of heaven. In other words, we need to invest our wealth in that which will outlast us.

We are to put our treasure in heaven not only because that which is eternal will last, but also because it will give us the right focus. Jesus didn't say our treasures will follow our hearts. Our hearts follow what we consider to be our treasures.

²² "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; ²³ but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!"

When we close our eyes, everything inside goes dark. When we open our eyes, light floods in and everything inside seems lighted. If we have good eyesight, the light shines in and it is bright inside of us. But if we have bad eyes, it is as though everything inside us becomes gray and dim. And if we lose our sight, everything inside us is darkness.

Jesus used this image to symbolize our perspective on life. Putting it another way, if our perspective is upon God and eternity, we walk in light. We are not likely to stumble because we see things as they really are. But if we don't see well, if our perspective is temporal, we're likely to trip.

The light in this image is God. The eye represents the human heart and the motivations of the heart. If the human heart is open to God and His kingdom, then the heart is filled with His presence and sees everything from the perspective of truth and eternity. If the heart is closed to God, then the person lives in ignorance, living only for the present.

²⁴ "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon."

A first century slave was the property of his master. He belonged to the master all day and every day. He didn't work for eight hours and have the rest of his time to himself. He did whatever his master wanted him to do, whenever he wanted it done.

Have two masters would make like totally miserable and unbearable. Two masters would mean two sets of commands, desires, expectations and instructions. Sometimes they would agree,

sometimes not. In some cases, following one would mean disobeying the other. It would be impossible to obey and honour both. In the end, one would be favoured, the other ignored.

In near eastern thought, the concepts of hate and love had little to do with emotions and feelings. They focused on devotion and priorities. In other words, if a man ended up being a full-time slave to two master, he would have to turn his back on one of them. The demands of the job would make it impossible for him to honour both.

The slave must decide which master he will serve. That choice resembles in the sense that when we love one person, we say no to all others. When a man marries a wife, it doesn't necessarily mean that he harbours emotional animosity towards other women he didn't marry. You can't dance to the music of two orchestras at the same time. You can't serve God and money.

We all serve something. Something governs our lives, determines our priorities, dictates how we spend our time, affects our dreams, writes our definition of success. The only question is, What or Whom will we serve?

You can serve money and God in pretense. You can serve God and use money, but you can't serve them both.

Final Example

In the game of Monopoly, players buy land and collect money. When one player has enough money and at least one monopoly of properties, he or she can buy houses and hotels and collect rent on them. Eventually one player receives enough rental money through land and building holdings to bankrupt the other players, thus ending the game. Parker Brothers, the makers of the game Monopoly, take for granted one final instruction—when the game is over, put all the pieces back in the box.

People who live for the present, who spend their strength on what cannot last, are like children who play Monopoly as though it were reality. In the end, we all get put in the box and we are gone. What matters is what remains when the game on earth is over.

Anxiety and Worry

²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? ²⁸ And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? ³¹ Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well. ³⁴ “Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day.” (Matthew 6:25-34)

Death was walking into a city one morning when a man stopped and asked what he was doing. “I’m going into the city to claim one thousand people,” Death answered. “That’s horrible,” said the man. “It’s terrible that you would take a thousand people.” “Look,” Death said, “get off my back. Taking people when their time has come is my job. Today I have to get my thousand.” Later, the man met him. Again, he was furious. “You told me this morning that you were going to take a thousand people, but seven thousand people died today.” “Don’t get on my case,” Death said. “I only took one thousand. Worry and anxiety killed all the rest.”

Worry can make us sick. It may be even possible to worry ourselves to death. When we worry, we don’t worry with our minds, we worry with our organs. And if we worry long enough and hard enough, we will make ourselves vulnerable to all kinds of sicknesses. Worry can even cause a person to commit suicide.

Jesus forbids anxious worry

The word which is used here is the Greek word *merimnan*, which means *to worry anxiously*. Its corresponding noun is *merimna*, which means *worry*. In a papyrus letter a wife writes to her absent husband: “I cannot sleep at night or by day, because of the worry (*merimna*) I have about your welfare.” The Jews themselves were very familiar with this attitude to life. It was the teaching of the great rabbis that a man ought to meet life with a combination of prudence and serenity.²⁴

People in Jesus’ day had just as much anxiety as we do. Some may think life was easier in the first century because the times were simpler and people didn’t have as much to worry about. But that is not really the case. Most of the people in the ancient world lived like members of the third world today. Labourers were paid every day because they needed the money to live the next day. The government gave them no security. They had no safety net. Some estimate that the average citizen in Palestine paid at least forty percent of his wages in taxes. Times may be hard today, but they were also tough in the past. Yet to people then and now, Jesus says, “Don’t worry.”²⁵

When Jesus declared “Don’t worry,” He didn’t mean we shouldn’t think about tomorrow, work for tomorrow, and plan for tomorrow. We need to do all of these things. God is not against working, He is against worrying.

Everyone needs to work. Jesus used the birds as an example. Birds work hard for food and shelter. But they do not worry. St. Paul wrote, “If a man will not work, he shall not eat” (2 Thess 3:10). What Jesus is saying is, “Be like the birds who work, but don’t worry.” Their Creator takes care of them as your heavenly Father will take care of you.

Worrying is useless. Most of the time, we worry about things in the future that will never happen. We worry about things in the past, but the past is over and can’t be changed. We worry, worry, worry, but worry doesn’t change anything. Problem solving does.

Worrying doesn’t solve problems; it gets in the way. We need to be at peace, calm and collected, to solve problems or to deal with issues properly. Problems are solved by taking our problems to prayer first and asking God for guidance. Then, we get the facts, and as much information as possible. Next, we analyze the facts and information, identifying possible solutions and possible outcomes. Finally, we return to prayer once again, and choose what seems to be the best solution possible.

²⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 1, 256.

²⁵ Haddon W. Robinson, *The Solid Rock Construction Company* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers, 1989), 63.

Worrying doesn't lengthen our life, it shortens it. By worrying, we don't at a moment to our lives or an inch to our height. Worrying can shorten our life.

Worry is sign of lack of faith. We worry because we have lost our trust that God will come through and provide. We feel that the responsibility is ours, and I can only depend upon myself.

If we worry about anything, it should be about God's kingdom. Jesus points this out with a touch of humor when He said, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself.

Seek first the Kingdom

Christians must prioritize the pursuit of holiness (righteousness) in their lives. This is not an excuse for laziness in practical matters (2 Thess 3:6-13), but a call to trust in the Father's care (Phil 4:6; CCC 2608).²⁶

Judging Others

¹ "Judge not, that you be not judged. ² For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. ³ Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? ⁴ Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite! First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye." (Matthew 7:1-5)

Several years ago, in a church in Southern California, the treasurer in the congregation was having an affair. The pastor confronted him and asked him if it was true. The man said yes. He also added that it was a very positive addition to his life and that he had no intention of repenting. Later, the pastor and an elder of the church confronted the treasurer again. They pointed out his sin and the damage it was doing. The man still refused to end the relationship. So, they took the matter to the leadership of the congregation, and they asked the man to appear before them, which he did. But in an arrogant and defiant way, he said that for the first time in his life he had found out what true love was, and he was not about to give it up. And so, reluctantly, the church excommunicated him. The man did not take it easily. He went through the community saying that the pastor and the congregation were unchristian, because they were judging him.²⁷ They had no right to do it, he claimed, because Jesus Himself said, "Judge not, that you be not judged" (Matthew 7:1).

One of the Most Misinterpreted Verses of the Bible

"Judge not, that you be not judged" (Matthew 7:1). This one of the most familiar sentences in the Bible, yet also one of the most misunderstood and misapplied.

²⁶ *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible*, 18.

²⁷ Haddon W. Robinson, *The Solid Rock Construction Company* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers, 1989), 78-79.

- a. *Leo Tolstoy* – believed that this verse was the basis for getting rid of all law courts. According to his interpretation, judges and juries act in direct disobedience to Jesus when they judge who is wrong in a legal matter.
- b. *Christians and Unbelievers* are guilty of misusing this Bible verse by ripping it out of its immediate context (7:1-5) and the general context of the Bible.
- c. *Unbelievers and even some Christians* are quick to say that Jesus told us that we weren't supposed to judge – so we'd better just keep our opinions to ourselves.
- d. *A typical response to correction is "Don't judge me."* The person who responds this way has made a judgment. They are accusing the person who made the correction of doing something wrong, i.e. correcting or reprimanding someone else.
- e. *Part of the problem* is deciding what we mean by "judging." In both Greek and English, the word has a multitude of meanings. Sometimes it means a simple *evaluation*; and sometimes it can mean *ensorship* or *condemnation*.

So, what is Jesus saying?

Is it wrong to judge a cake-baking contest? A talent competition? Athletes in a sporting event?
Is it unchristian to give a recommendation for a student who wants to go to college or university?

Is it wrong to expect students to write tests and then evaluate the results?

Is it sinful to evaluate someone who applies for a job?

Are employers wrong to give their employees job reviews?

All these examples require one to make judgments. Judgments are necessary to assess, compare, to evaluate, and make good decisions.

There are examples in the Bible where Jesus requires us to make sound judgments or he and the Apostles make judgments about sinful behaviour and provide correction. See Matthew 7:6, Matthew 7:15-20, Matthew 18:15-18, John 8:11, Galatians 2:11-21, Acts 8:20-21, 1 Corinthians 5:3-5; 12:23, 1 John 4:1-16.

What about the Church?

In its list of *Spiritual Works of Mercy*, the Church tells us that it is important to *admonish the sinner* and to *instruct the ignorant*. The Church also teaches us that we participate in another person's sin, when we: *fail to disciple for the sin committed*, and by *remaining silent about the sin committed*.²⁸ Does not all of this require us to judge, to evaluate, and to correct?

So, what kind of "judging" is wrong and offensive to God?

We can judge the sin, but we cannot judge the person. We can say that this or that kind of behaviour is bad or good (God has done this for us), but we cannot assess the person as being "bad or good." That kind of assessment belongs to God, who alone knows the heart, the life story and spiritual condition of each person. We must always treat the person with great respect and dignity, as a brother or sister, a child of God, created in the image of God. We must always see "Jesus" in the other person. How we treat the other person is how we treat Jesus. What we do to the other person, we do to Jesus.

²⁸ *Catechism of the Ukrainian Catholic Church: Our Pascha*, par. 314.

We are guilty of “judging” if we do so in a spirit of self-righteousness. This means putting other people down or tearing them down. This means speaking negatively about others, condemning or harshly criticizing them from an “elevated platform.” Not “eye to eye” but looking down at them as someone inferior.

We are guilty of “judging” if we criticize to elevate ourselves. The motivation can be selfish. Some people feel a certain satisfaction or delight in point out the defects or flaws of others. It makes them look better and builds up their reputation of being righteous. Some people will point out the failures of others, so as to showcase their own successes.

We are guilty of “judging” if we do so with hypocrisy. The word “hypocrite” is close to our word for actor. (In Greek, literally “under a mask”). A hypocrite pretends to be someone who he is not, or acts in way that does not reflect what he really is thinking or feeling. A hypocrite is someone who judges, but he himself is guilty of the same sin. For example, a habitual liar is not in the position to judge and correct others for lying.

We are guilty of “judging” if we refuse to forgive. Judgment and condemnation is the opposite of forgiveness. To refuse to forgive someone, is to “judge” them, i.e. to condemn them, to insist on justice rather than mercy. This kind of “judgment” belongs to God alone.

We are guilty of “judging” if we our judgement is rash. A conclusion was make too soon, without all the facts and necessary information. Also, the information we received may have been one-sided, biased, or unreliable.

Christian Life – What should we do, so as not to judge others unjustly?

When faced with making judgments, assessments, evaluations and corrections.

1. *Make sure you have the facts.* Ask yourself, “Do I have all the facts or information required to make a good judgment (evaluation)?” Are they true and reliable? Or is the information biased, one-sided, or based on hearsay? Avoid rash judgments. Is it clear and beyond a doubt that the other person is committing a sin? Is the behaviour of the person objectively wrong and unacceptable?
2. *Self-judgment comes first. Am I free from hypocrisy?* Am I guilty of doing the same thing that I am accusing the other? Do I need to first address my own behaviour and wrongdoing?
3. *What is my motivation?* Where is my judgment coming from? Is it stemming from unforgiveness, envy, hurt pride, anxiety, contempt or resentment? Or am I motivated by true charity (*agape* love) and genuine concern for the well-being of others? Am I at peace? “If your affections (feelings) are charitable, your judgments will be the same” (St. Frances de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*).
4. *What is my attitude?* Am I humble or self-righteous? Am I looking down at the person as someone inferior? Or am I addressing the person “eye to eye”? Am I harsh and condemning in my criticism?
5. *Whose is responsible?* Am I overstepping my boundaries? Is someone else responsible to make the judgment and correction? Am I usurping someone’s authority? Am I morally obligated to do something or say something?

6. *Don't gossip or slander.* If need be, confide in one or two other people, to check if you have judged properly and to seek advice on how best to respond.
7. *What's the right thing to do?* Am I able to correct the other person in a spirit of gentleness and firmness, charity and compassion? Will I be "building up" the person, or "tearing him down"? Am I avoiding gossip or slander? Remember, no body likes to be corrected. People get defensive. We would probably react the same way if we were corrected or reprimanded.

Respect for the Holy

⁶ "Do not give dogs what is *holy*; and do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under foot and turn to attack you." (Matthew 7:6)

This was a popular derogatory Jewish saying used for pagans (Gentiles). In Hebrew, the word for *holy* is *kadosh* (K D SH) and the Aramaic word for an ear-ring is *kadasha* (K D SH). It is possible that the original saying was: "Do not give an *ear-ring* to dogs; nor throw your *pearls* before swine." In this case, the parallelism would be perfect.²⁹ If this is the original saying, then it would simply mean that pagan (Gentiles) can't be trusted. No point giving them precious gifts – in the end they will turn on you.

Dogs were generally undomesticated in Jewish culture, and most were stray scavengers. Swine were especially contemptible to Jews; they were unclean and could not be eaten (Lev 11:7-8). It is possible that by altering one word, Jesus redirected this insulting label to anyone inhospitable to the gospel and the word of God, both Jew or Gentile (cf. Phil 3:2; Rev 22:15).³⁰

What is holy?

In Judaism, holiness characterized anything consecrated for covenant worship. To treat holy articles in a common manner would profane them (Ex 29:37; Lev 22:10-16). Jesus carries this same notion into the New Covenant. The word *holy* would apply to Jesus' teachings and the gospel, the Holy Scriptures, and the Holy Mysteries (Sacraments). The early Church applied this statement to the Holy Eucharist, a sacrament rightly withheld from the unbaptized (*Didache* 9:5).³¹

Persistence in Prayer: Ask, Seek, Knock

⁷ "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. ⁹ Or what man of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? ¹¹ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! ¹² So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets." (Matthew 7:7-12).

²⁹ William, Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 1, 268.

³⁰ *RSV Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: New Testament*, 2nd Ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 19

³¹ *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible*, 19

Jesus advocates faith and perseverance in prayer (cf. Lk 18:1; Col 4:2; 1 Thess 5:17). Answered prayers stem from upright and faith-filled intentions (Jas 1:5-8; CCC 2609).³²

What is not captured well in English is that each of the words—ask, seek, and knock—are in the present tense, which denotes a continued action. The verbs here mean we are to keep on asking and it will be given to us. Keep on seeking and we will find. Keep on knocking and the door will be opened. The emphasis³³ is not merely on prayer but persistence in prayer. Pray for different things but be persistent.

We are to persist in prayer not because God needs to be convinced or nagged into a response. We are to persist because God has promised to answer. It's just a matter of time. Jesus makes it clear that those who persist in sincere prayer with faith shall receive a response.

Jesus assures us that God the Father will always give us what is needed and what is best. Would an earthly father mock his children or give them something harmful? No. No father would refuse the sincere requests of his children. Since our heavenly Father is by far greater than any earth Father, his response to our requests will always be perfect and best. He will answer according to our needs, as any good father would. Even though we are imperfect, we want to give our children good gifts. But our heavenly Father does even more. We don't always know what's best to give to our children, but our heavenly Father knows exactly what we need.³⁴

God always answers our prayers; but He will answer them in His way and at the right time, according to His knowledge, understanding and wisdom.

In the end, what do we really need? Gifts? Yes. God knows we need bread and fish to eat. But what we really need is God. The greatest gift from persistent prayer is God Himself.

The Narrow Gate

¹³ “Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. ¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” (Matthew 7:13-14)

In verses 13-14, Jesus paints a scene depicting a narrow gate and a wide gate. The way to the narrow gate is hard, but the way to the main gate is easy. The imagery behind these verses was common to someone living in the first century.

Cities surrounded by a fortified wall had gates to permit access. Main gates were wide and tall enough for caravans of people and animals to easily pass through; the road that led to the main gate was also wider, level and smooth, much easier to travel. Smaller gates into the city were much more restrictive and thus less popular, they provided access only for pedestrians; the roads that led to these gates were usually narrow, going up and down, and thus requiring greater effort to travel.

Most people would enter through the main gate because it was easier if you were travelling with animals, carts, and possessions. The way through narrow gates was much more difficult and

³² Ignatius Catholic Study Bible, 19.

³³ Haddon Robinson, *The Solid Rock Construction Company*, 102.

³⁴ Haddon Robinson, *The Solid Rock Construction Company*, 106-107.

restrictive; meant for pedestrians and the poor, who those had little or nothing to bring in. Those who were influential or powerful, obviously used the main road and the main gate.

Enter by the narrow gate

The word “enter” here is an invitation. Jesus is inviting us into the kingdom of heaven and eternal Life. But He makes it clear that the entrance gate is narrow, and the way is hard. So, what does this mean? What is Jesus speaking about?

First, Christian discipleship is not easy. It requires self denial and involves carrying a cross. Jesus said, “If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me” (Matthew 16:24). Following the way of a generous and sincere Christian life is very demanding, but it leads to Life and eternal salvation. Those who deny themselves are “poor in spirit.” They are stripped of all things, detached. And so, their hands are free to take up their cross (their responsibilities in life, difficulties, trials, persecution, and suffering) and walk the narrow path that climbs upward.

Second, the narrow gate is the gate of repentance, death and the resurrection. It is not possible for us to enter through it on our own. But the Holy Spirit makes it possible, with our repentance. Jesus said: “For men this is impossible, but for God, all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26). In the Mystery of Baptism, we are united to the death and resurrection of Christ. We die with Him, to rise with Him, and to ascend with Him into the kingdom. This is the narrow gate.

The wide road and gate lead to destruction

Those who are attached to their wealth and possessions, to a life of leisure and pleasure, to power and prestige – these travel the wide road, which is level and smooth. No climbing up and going down. It’s an easy road in life that accommodates all their desires. No self denial required. No rules or restrictions with respect to moral life. This road is popular... until you pass through the final gate.

The wide gate is death without repentance and death without God. It ends in hell and eternal damnation. It’s wide, because it desires to take everyone, and its not difficult to pass through.

False Prophets and Self-Deception

¹⁵ **“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ So, every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. ¹⁸ A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will know them by their fruits.**

²¹ **Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to Me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and cast out demons in Your name, and do many mighty works in Your name?’ ²³ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.’”** (Matthew 7:15- 23)

Years ago, the Museum of Art in Amsterdam put some of their priceless originals next to copies and held a contest to see how many participants could tell the false from the true. Of the 1827 people who took part in the experiment, only seven were able to distinguish the genuine originals from the fake. What is true of the painting is true of prophets.

People in our society believe in their senses. So, if it looks like a duck, waddles like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it must be duck. Generally, that is true. But if an animal looks like a sheep, sounds like a sheep, and is covered with wool, it is probably a sheep; but it could be a clever wolf.

It is not always easy to distinguish true prophets (teachers) from false ones. Both may share many features in common. So how do we identify a true prophet?

First, you can't rely on clothing. Both true and false prophets (teachers) could be wearing clerical collars, cassocks, crosses, etc. Both may have been ordained by some Christian denomination; and both may exhibit the marks of a genuine calling.

Second, you can't distinguish true prophets from false ones by their works and ministry, no matter how miraculous. Jesus said, "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name drive out demons and perform miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me you evildoers!'" (7:21-23). Evidently false prophets as well as true ones can cast out demons, display spiritual powers, and perform miracles. Judas, along with the other apostles, had power to heal and expel demons. Speaking about the last times, Jesus said, "At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!'" or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible" (Matthew 24:23-24). Just because someone heals the sick does not mean he or she is a true prophet. We cannot confirm the identity of true prophets by the miracles they perform.

Third, you can't rely on theological vocabulary. Both true and false prophets know how to use the same words. Historically, one of the way that false prophets brought in false teaching was by using orthodox words but filling them with different meaning. The right words were used to bet a across a wrong message.

So how do we identify the prophets of God? How do we distinguish the true ones from the false ones? Jesus answered that question twice. "By their fruits you will recognize them." He said this in verse 16 and again in verse 20.

A true prophet teaches what Jesus taught, what He passed on to His apostles, and what the apostles have passed on to their successors, the bishops, from generation to generation, and what the Catholic Church continues to teach. A true prophet speaks accurately and faithfully on behalf of the Church; and he lives by what he teaches, by word and by example.

A false prophet may appear to be harmless, but his ministry breeds error, division, rebellion, and immorality.

Building on Solid Foundation

²⁴ "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; ²⁵ and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.

²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish

man who built his house upon the sand; ²⁷ and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it.”

²⁸ And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, ²⁹ for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes. (Matthew 7:24-28)

*At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus expresses concern about good housing. Why should we be surprised? Like Joseph, his guardian and stepfather, He was a builder (in Greek, *teknon*), not just a carpenter. Jesus knew the difference between a solid building and a shoddy one. Therefore, Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount with some final words about wise and unwise builders.*

In his last illustration, Jesus describes two men who had built homes. The builders had several things in common. First, both were building permanent homes. They weren't putting up toolsheds or erecting tents. They wanted to settle down, raise their families, and pass on a home to their children.

They were probably building similar dwellings as well. Jesus put no emphasis at all on any difference in design. For all we know they may have used the same blueprints and the same materials. They may have been situated in a slightly different position on the ground, but for Jesus' purposes the two buildings could have been identical. The differences would not be seen by the average person. The houses looked the same. The casual observer could not see that the foundations were different. Although that difference was not obvious, it was fundamental.

One man built his house on a foundation of rock, the other put his house on the foundation of sand. It is difficult for us to imagine that someone would decide to build a house on sand. But the picture is not as absurd as it appears. In early summer many of the areas in Palestine, or even in Canada, look like lovely places to build homes. The land is smooth, the view is magnificent, and the sandy plain baked by the sun looks like an inviting place to live.

Besides, building on sand takes a lot less effort. Digging into rock requires more sweat and time. Erecting mansions on the sand has distinct advantages and that's why people build there today. On the West Coast people build their homes on or next to faults. Others build on cliffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean. They have a marvellous view of the sunset. But when a storm comes it eats away the ground underneath the house, and some of those lavish homes slide down the hill; some even tumble into the ocean. Even after such disasters others insist on constructing homes on the cliffs and hillsides again.

Storms, Jesus said, reveal the difference between houses that appear to be identical. The pounding rain reveals the stability of the foundation; the wind tests the strength of what has been built.

Obviously, Jesus wasn't talking about the construction business. Not was He giving instructions on how to build houses. He was offering a lesson on building a life. Although we can use many pictures to describe our lives, Jesus chose a building metaphor. Our lives resemble houses. Everyone is building a house of some sort; and all of us have to have a foundation for our lives. Something on which we build. It may not be much more than shifting sand or it may be solid as a rock.

Some people build their lives on possessions—how much they own. Some build their lives on passions—the satisfaction of their desires. Some build their lives on position—their jobs, careers, and offices they hold. And some build their lives on what is eternal.

All of us are building a life according to some scheme, some design. We don't build at random. We all have a worldview, a philosophy. We all have something important to us on which the building blocks of our lives rest.

All of us will be tested

Jesus said that all of us will have the foundation of our lives tested. All of us—the wise builders and the foolish builders.

Living in the sunshine of life doesn't tell us much about ourselves. Anybody can build a house that will stand firm when the sun is shining, and the wind is still. It is the storms that reveal the strength of our foundations.

Sometimes the storm breaks us with the fury of a great temptation. One man, who worked for a financial institution, had debts he couldn't pay. He had access to funds at work and was tempted to "borrow" some. Another man was strongly tempted to throw aside his marriage, his family, and his reputation. He was romantically overwhelmed by a young woman. What we really are is exposed by the storm of temptation.

Sometimes the storm is a crushing personal loss. You may lose a job that not only provides income but also provides you with self-esteem and personal security. A carefully built stock portfolio suddenly destroyed can be like a tornado roaring through the comfortable life you have built for yourselves. When we realize that we haven't built up the security we counted on and everything in our life comes tumbling down, we see exposed the faulty foundation of our lives.

Sometimes the storm roars in the form of sickness or the fear of death. You can lose your health and anguish, pain, and the prospect of death may come between you and the leisurely retirement you've anticipated. You begin to question the strength of the life you've built. And when someone you love passes away, a not-so-solid foundation can start coming apart. Times like these reveal the foundations of our lives.

For others, the foundations are tested by prosperity. Prosperity comes to us like a gentle spring rain. At first, we're convinced it will make our lives green and healthy. But when prosperity keeps coming, it can develop into a large destructive force as damaging as a storm. Many have fallen away from their faith because of wealth.

For all of us there comes the storm of judgment, as certain as the fact of life, death, and God Himself. We will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ and give an account for all the days of our lives. That storm will be the final test of whether our foundation is rock or sand, whether we have built on what is secure or on what is fleeting.

We are all building, Jesus declared, and what we are building will be tested, not in the sunshine but in the storm.

Some will stand, others will fall

The third this Jesus conveyed is that some will stand while others will fall. Jesus said that those who hear His words and practice them build wisely. To hear the Word is essential, but to do it is to know it. The centre, the focus, the foundation of our lives must be our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Faith requires assent, surrender, and obedience. People who build on that foundation will stand when the storm comes. In the day of judgment that foundation will hold us secure.

But not all houses will stand. In fact, the Sermon on the Mount ends with a severe note of judgement. We like sermons that end positively, on a pleasant note, that sends us away feeling good about ourselves. But Jesus issued a storm warning at the end of His Sermon.

Jesus had a lot to say about judgement and hell. In His Sermon He mentioned two doors, two roads, and two voices. Those who choose the broad way will end up in destruction, and those who follow the false prophets will be like refuse thrown into the fire. In chapter 5, Jesus talks about hell and compares it to Gehenna, the garbage dump outside Jerusalem. He pictured judgment and its destruction like being thrown into the garbage dump of the universe.

Jesus used all kinds of images—darkness, fire, a garbage dump—to tell us that destruction is coming for those whose houses don't stand. God takes us very seriously, even though we may not take ourselves seriously. But the decisions we make and the foundation on which we build has eternal implications. We make choices, and they make us what we are. And those who choose to build on sand will one day find their house has crumbled.

Therefore, we must not only be careful how we build, we must choose carefully what we build on. What is the foundation of our life? What really matters to us? That's what will be revealed at the judgment.

The crowds were astonished at His teaching

Jesus taught as one who has authority. At thirty years of age, this son of a builder (carpenter) from an insignificant village, spoke with an authority that the older scribes and the teachers of the law did not possess.

When the prophets spoke in the Old Testament, they introduced their message by saying, "Thus says the Lord." That little phrase appears almost three thousand times in the Old Testament. The prophets did not speak with their own authority; they spoke with the authority of God. It is striking that Jesus never used that phrase. He spoke with His own authority.

In Matthew 5:17 Jesus said that He had come to fulfill the Law. In His own life, by the way He lived, He embodied all that the Law pointed to. Not only in actions, but in motives. In addition, Jesus said that He fulfilled the entire Old Testament: all OT prophecies pointed forward to Him, all OT promises related to Him, all OT history ultimately touched on Him, and the future depended on Him. He was the one of whom all the prophets spoke. And He Himself would be the Judge of all people.

The final Judge of the universe preached this Sermon. And eternal destinies will be decided by what people do with Him and what He does with them. He spoke with authority all through the Sermon when He interpreted or reapplied the law, when He promised, when He commanded, when He prohibited. Not in the name of God, but as God Himself. The people never heard anyone do that because no one like Him had ever appeared on the earth before.

After studying the Sermon on the Mount, we recognize that it is not merely another moral code. It has a way of condemning us, looking into our hearts and revealing our motives. And we come away, as Jesus said in the first beatitude, with poverty of spirit. Without Him we are helpless.