

the SERMON on the MOUNT

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PREFACE

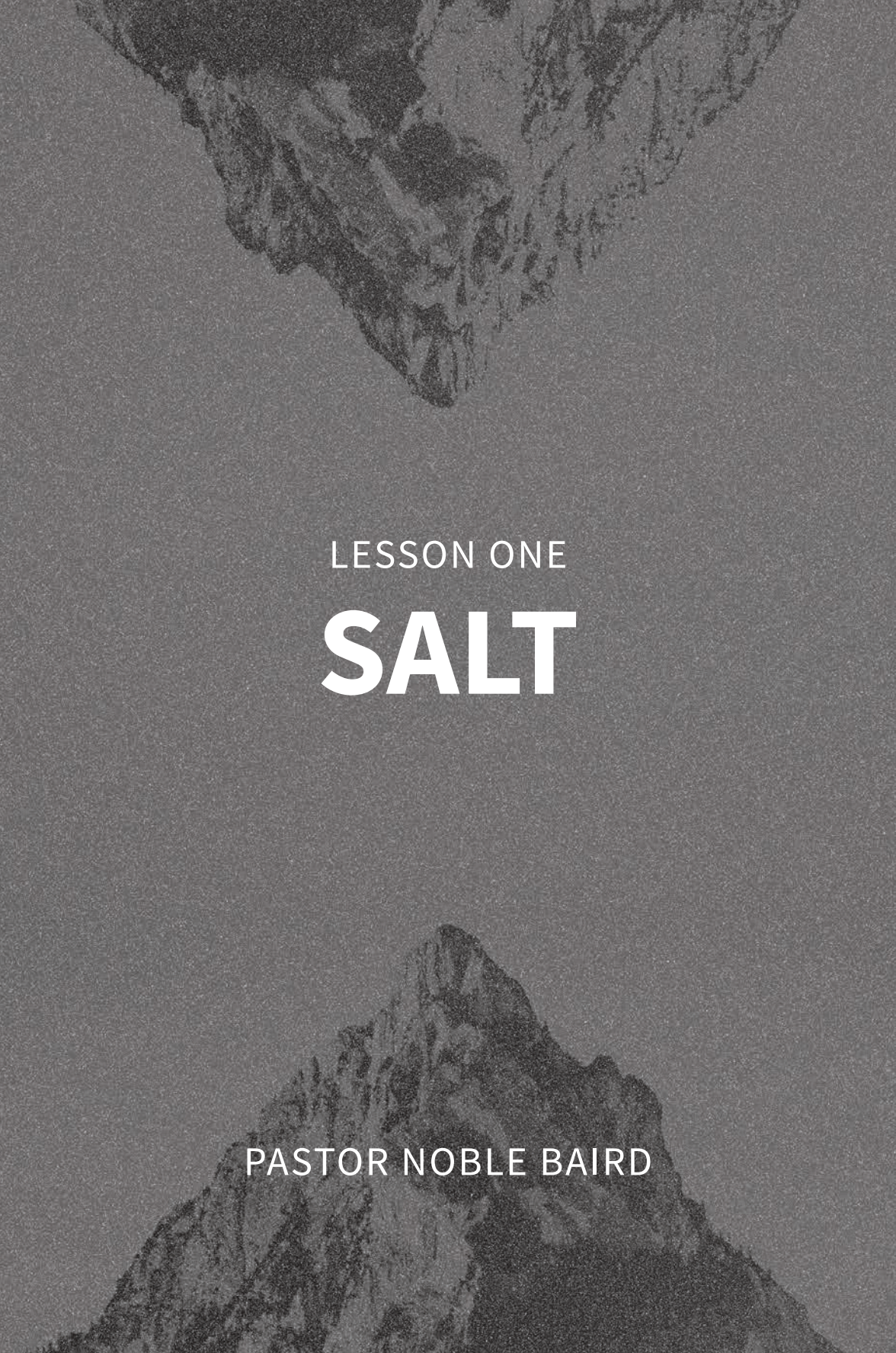
Matthew chapters 5-7 contain the most famous sermon of all time. In His sermon, Jesus goes on the mountainside to encourage and challenge His listeners. This famous oratory address is called The Sermon on the Mount.

Philip Yancey wrote, “Thunderously, inarguably, the Sermon on the Mount proves that before God we all stand on level ground: murderers and temper-throwers, adulterers and lusters, thieves and coveters. We are all desperate, and that is in fact the only state appropriate to a human being who wants to know God. Having fallen from the absolute Ideal, we have nowhere to land but in the safety net of absolute grace.”

The Bible is not about morality, how good we are, or how good we can be. The Bible is a love story that points out how far we have fallen away from God, so God sent His Son to provide the only way to redeem our relationship with Him. We become a new creation. It should make us want to do good things, not in order to get to Heaven, but because we are going to Heaven.

The Sermon on the Mount addresses several points of Jesus’ message as found in Matthew chapter 5. Not only are believers encouraged to be salt and light in the world, but they are challenged in areas of the Law, anger, lust, divorce, oaths, retaliation, and loving your enemies.

The Sermon on the Mount contains nine study guides for group discussion and fifty-four devotions for personal development. The goal of *The Sermon on the Mount* is for the reader first to realize their sinful condition and need for a Savior. Once that is settled, we need to live for the Lord. It is not always easy. Jesus addresses some very challenging topics. With Him, you can take on the challenge.



LESSON ONE

SALT

PASTOR NOBLE BAIRD

"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 trampled under people's feet." Matthew 5:13

Here in Michigan, salt is a pretty valuable tool. No matter what county you live in, when that cold weather hits, you know it will not take long for those big orange trucks to fire up and get those caution lights going. Regardless of whether you have lived here all your life or just one year of experiencing our two seasons (road construction and snow), you know how important salt is when the snow comes.

1. What are some crazy stories or experiences you have had with snow?

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2. Are you a fan of the snow or are you contemplating being a Michigan snow-bird and trying to fly down to Florida when the snow comes?

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In Matthew 5:13, Jesus uses the concept of salt to continue His discussion in our call as His followers. If you remember last year, we began the Sermon on the Mount by going through the Beatitudes. Jesus really laid out what a sanctified life ought to look like as we grow, one day at a time, in our walks with the Lord, striving to be more like Christ. Those Beatitudes ultimately culminated in Matthew 5:10-12 where Jesus says, ***"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***

'Blessed are you when others 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 they persecuted the prophets who were before you.'" It is such a beautiful and encouraging reminder that as we grow in our walks with the Lord, persecution will come - physically, emotionally, and mentally. However, regardless of the form of the persecution we receive as we share the Gospel of Christ, we are truly blessed as we have been given the gift of salvation and life, eternal life, through Christ's death, burial, and resurrection!

3. What Beatitude was a challenge or encouragement for you?

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4. Is there a Beatitude over this past year that you have been working on and allowing the Lord to work in your life?

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Jesus says in Matthew 5:13, ***"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 trampled under people's feet."*** This concept of salt Jesus uses was understood by His followers and certainly all those listening as a very important tool during this time. During the time of Christ and even into the 20th century before refrigeration was created and more widely used, salt was used as a preservative. So, with this concept and understanding in mind of salt being a preservative, it is interesting how Christ is calling His followers preservatives if you will. Calling them to help reach out and save those around them who are

dying in their sin, rotting if we follow along with the illustration Christ is making.

Furthermore, when we look at salt in the culinary world (I am no Chef Ramsay, but I love watching *Master Chef!*), it is used as a supplement to improve meats and make them even better than before! In the same way, we have been called to this as well. Before Christ ascended to Heaven He said, ***"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age"*** (Matthew 28:19-20). As His followers, and in being the salt of the world, we are called to not only make disciples but to teach and instruct them in the ways of the Lord and certainly Christ's teachings. Why? So that a lost and rotting world may be preserved, ultimately improved, and made better than before through this sanctification process that takes place once we come to faith in Christ!

5. When was the last time you took an opportunity to be the "salt" of the earth and shared the truth of the Gospel with someone?

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6. Is there a sense of urgency from Christ when He uses this concept of being salt in the world?

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Jesus did not just stop there, there is a flip side and another option - laziness. Christ posed a question in Matthew 5:13 asking how salt

that loses its taste can be restored? Sadly, this is a reality of many who claim to be followers of Christ. Often, at the time of salvation, a fire is ignited. It is exciting and truly encouraging to see. However, if that passion does not remain and the things of this world begin to take priority over the call of being salt in a lost and rotting world, that fire can grow smaller and smaller and the light grows faint. The focus is no longer on Christ and His will, but focused inward or simply a plateau of religious liturgy that means nothing to us personally, emotionally, or spiritually. Know my heart. I have been there. I have experienced those times of drought where my focus was shifted off the call Christ has placed in my life. That is why Jesus gives this warning. If we truly grasp this concept of being called the salt of the world, we must have a heart, mind, focus, and desire to follow after Christ and allow His Word to take precedence over our life.

7. Is there anything in your life that is causing you to lose your effectiveness or take priority over your calling to be the salt of the world?

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8. What are some practical habits or disciplines you can implement in your life and the life of your family?

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Sadly, all too often, we become distracted and even motivated by the things of this world. They can take the form of many different things: job, sports, relationships, status, or you fill in the blank. Whatever it may be, these things take precedence over our walk with the Lord and ultimately our desires to have Him as the priority in our lives.

What can then happen is exactly what Christ warns about in this teaching. If we lose our desire to reach the world and share the love of Christ, we lose our effectiveness. Therefore as Christ uses this imagery, we ought to be thrown out into the streets to be trampled on under people's feet. This is really such a great reminder and image to have as we allow the things of this world to trample and distract us from our calling.

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:14-21, ***"For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."*** This is one of my favorite passages of Scripture. Paul is expounding on and reminding the church in Corinth and us of our call as followers of Jesus Christ. We have been reconciled to the Father through the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Therefore, we are called to be ambassadors! We have the privilege to be walking examples, representations, and witnesses of who Christ is and what He did for all! Therefore, it is my prayer and hope that we will not only be living examples and representatives of Christ, but that we will be

salty ambassadors who desire to preserve a lost, hurting, broken, and rotting world for the Gospel!

9. Who is someone you need to reach out to and simply show the love of Christ with, not just in word, but in action?

_____

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_____

10. Not a question, but a challenge. If you truly desire to be the salt of the world - pray for that this week. Pray for that as a family. Then, when an opportunity comes and as the Spirit leads you, do not hesitate. Be bold, confident, and remember your calling as an ambassador of Christ!



MICHIGAN

SALT, DEVOTION 1

Rich Sawicki

I really enjoy living in the state of Michigan.

We are truly blessed to have the opportunity to experience all four seasons. I have to say that my favorite season is winter. There is nothing quite like that very first snowfall of the year. It looks truly amazing before anyone has driven or walked through the new covering of snow. It is perfect, without spot or blemish, it covers everything and makes it look pure.

Although, I love the way it looks when the fresh snow blankets everything, I do not recommend being the first one out on the roads, as it can be very dangerous. Underneath that beautiful white covering lies an extremely deadly and dangerous layer of ice. Our road commission workers tirelessly work to make sure we have safe roads to travel on in these harsh weather conditions. I am extremely thankful that they brave the dangerous snow and salt the roads, so we do not spin out of control.

Jesus calls us the salt of the earth. Matthew 5:13 says, ***"You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet."***

The salt that is used to melt the icy roads and keep people from spinning out of control, does absolutely nothing if it is left just sitting in a giant pile at the road commission's yard. The salt must be applied to the icy roads, in direct contact with the ice, for it to work.

As Christ's followers, we also must be brave like the road commission workers. We need to be in direct relationships with non-believers in order to broadcast our salt, to melt their icy hearts, and keep them safe from disaster.

Once the salt on the road gets diluted, either from being crushed by the weight of the cars driving over it or the dirty water from the ice melt being mixed into the salt, it is no longer effective.

Like the brave workers who are responsible for salting the earth, we must not let the slippery one dilute our witness by mixing in a watered-down version of the truth or crushing our beliefs and standards on the road of life.

Stay safe out there!

MAC N CHEESE

SALT, DEVOTION 2

Jeremy Smith

In Matthew chapter 5, Jesus is teaching the disciples and others about what it will be like if you are a follower of Christ. Jesus has just finished up the Beatitudes and let the disciples know that they will be persecuted for their beliefs. He then says in Matthew 5:13, ***"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 trampled under people's feet."*** Jesus is referring to the believer as "salt of the earth" or honest people. Jesus is encouraging us, as believers, to be genuine and truthful. By giving a call for us to follow Him, Jesus is leaving an invitation for us to be from the world, but not like the world. Jesus did not come to the earth and fake it to make it. Jesus gave us a very real example of what we should aspire to be in our daily lives.

For us, as believers, to take a stand for our beliefs has not been a traditionally easy task. It would be much simpler to take the easy route and fall into line with how society views it. It is easy to be rude or hostile towards others; it is not so easy to show love and kindness. It is not a struggle to comment on others and tear them down versus giving a compliment to someone else who is doing a good job. It matters to take an extra couple of seconds in the day to really, truly show others the undeserved love or kindness we have been shown from God.

When I was on vacation recently, or what I was hoping would be a vacation, I did not anticipate having my 5-year-old daughter also home from school sick. Despite my intended plans, I figured it would be a long weekend for the both of us. That peaceful thought

of having some extra time with our youngest was quickly dashed about five minutes after my wife took the other kids to school. I was awakened to the bed violently shaking and a crazy demand for “mac and cheese, now!” I tried to suggest maybe we eat something such as cereal, yogurt, or fruit to no avail. Next thing you know, I am at the stove, 8:20 AM, making mac and cheese for breakfast. The worst part for me - it was not even real mac and cheese. She prefers the blue box, with the fake cheese. I was reminded that being “salt” starts at home.

Are you being real or are you faking it? As the verse said if your salt has lost its flavor, ***“It is no longer good for anything.”*** If there is even a slight question, then start today with repenting and clearing everything up between yourself and God. God can provide forgiveness that will make you like a brand new container, full and ready to go.

TASTY

SALT, DEVOTION 3

Angela Cox

"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 trampled under people's feet." Matthew 5:13

Salt is known to preserve certain types of foods. Good salt contains properties making preservation successful when there are no means of refrigeration or safe ways to store food. This would have been very helpful in the first century.

Salt, also, flavors food. Some of us even salt our meals before tasting to see if it needs any extra flavoring.

When we look at the context in Scripture of ***"you are the salt of the earth,"*** Jesus is saying we have the ability to preserve His Word! We are to "flavor" the world with His "food" (the Bible). What is interesting here can be the phrase, ***"But if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?"*** Salt does not lose its flavor. It simply dissolves leaving its flavor behind. I think this parable is speaking more in the context of when we do not utilize His Word and share it with the world, then what good is it?

We have been called to love God and love His people (Matthew 22:37-40). When we "salt" the Earth we are speaking His goodness! I would like to think this parable is not necessarily only saying, "If you do not spread God's Word then it is wasted." All of Scripture is a good thing! God's Word never goes bad! It never loses its power.

Therefore, when it says, ***"It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and tramples under people's feet,"*** I believe it is Jesus saying, "I will not let any of it go to waste!" Take this Scripture and make it a positive. Jesus will use all of it for His good. Strive to be a light in a dark place. We need to salt the Earth with His goodness!

SALT MAKES THINGS SWEETER

SALT, DEVOTION 4

Joanna Montgomery

When I was young, my mother was making oatmeal and added sugar to it. I tasted it and said, “It doesn’t taste right, I think it needs more sugar.” She said, “No, it has enough sugar, what it needs to make it sweeter, is salt.” I thought salt would make it taste terrible; however, after she added a bit of salt, the oatmeal was so much better!

Matthew 5:13 states, ***“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 trampled under people’s feet.”*** Christians who walk with Christ are to be the salt that makes life in this world better.

The world wants us to accept people for what and who they want to be, which sounds sweet. Just as more sugar in the oatmeal would have made it inedible, loving and accepting others for who and what they want to be is hopeless. Christ teaches us to love people out of their fallen state. We are salt providing real truth and real love. People need to be lovingly told their eternity is hopeless without Christ. Being who and what they want to be is a path to loneliness, despair, and loss. Accepting Christ and repenting of sin is the only true path to happiness and love. As the salt of the Earth, we must pour out the truth of the Gospel into the world.

Salt does no good sitting in a container on our counter, it must be added to food to make a difference. Romans 10:14 states, ***“How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?”***

As salt, we verbally share Christ with others to be flavor added to life; not the whole container of salt at once, which is not good either. Lovingly shared truth is the way people will hear they are lost and learn how to be saved. Share the truth of the Gospel in love for others to desire hope in Christ. If this is too hard for you (and it is hard), ask the Holy Spirit to speak through you. He will!

Christ did not just let people continue down a path of destruction. Even Nicodemus, who was a righteous Jewish leader of the day, was told he had to be born again in order to have eternity in Heaven. He had to believe Christ was sent as his Savior, turn away from his sin, and allow God to save him. His righteousness only made his life seem good, but he needed the salt of truth Christ provided.

We must share the Gospel of Christ, verbally and through our actions. In this way, we will be salt that adds the flavor of truth.

SALTY

SALT, DEVOTION 5

Larry Gabbara

I like salt. My wife says that my salt meter is broken. I say I like to taste the salt on my food.

Salt is a commodity we use often and most likely daily. The Bible talks a lot about salt. Salt has for centuries been a symbol of taste, purity, preservation, fidelity, luxury, and welcome because of its characteristic qualities and usage in pre-medieval life and customs,. However, salt is also associated with negative connotations, namely being chastised, contaminated, and being seen as unhealthy. Jesus says that salt that loses its saltiness is good for nothing.

A few years back, my wife and I had an opportunity to visit Israel. One of the stops we made while there was to the Dead Sea. It was a very interesting place to visit. The properties of the water make it difficult to swim in because salty water weighs more than freshwater. However, you can float without any effort at all. It is very good for the body because of the unique minerals and therapeutic salt in the Dead Sea. Being 34% salt makes it impossible for anything to live in the sea. It is pretty incredible that nothing can survive in the salty water, but it is still good for our skin.

Matthew 5:13 says, ***"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 trampled under people's feet."***

Jesus says to His disciples, ***"You are the salt of the earth."*** Then, as now, salt served a variety of functions. Before the days of

refrigeration, salt was used widely as a preservative by rubbing it into the meat. In some cases, it could be used as a kind of fertilizer. Also, of course, it was used to bring flavor to food. Today we continue to use salt in many other ways, from softening our water to melting ice on our roads.

Jesus' call for His followers to be the ***"salt of the earth"*** carries those uses, symbolically, into our spiritual lives. Jesus started speaking in Matthew chapter 5 of the Beatitudes. As Jesus was speaking to the disciples, He continued His Sermon on the Mount by referring to them as salt. This made a lot of sense because, in their time, salt was a valued commodity. Also salt refers to them as having a long-lasting influence and value.

Our saltiness must represent our Christ-like influence on the world. We must be the representation of Jesus in our culture today. We cannot allow our saltiness to disappear, we must be an example to the world that we are children of God!

"Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person." Colossians 4:6

SWEETNESS

SALT, DEVOTION 6

Jill Osmon

I found myself staring at the thawed beef ready to make tacos for the kids I was watching. Thinking to myself, where is the taco seasoning packet? So I searched for it everywhere in the kitchen and could not find it. I texted my friend, whose kids I was staying with, and asked her where the taco seasoning packet was. Much to my surprise, she did not have any. She just flavored her ground beef with spices that she threw in. I knew nothing of this way! I was a taco seasoning packet household (Who seasons their own or who uses the packets?), but thankfully I figured it out! Flavoring is super important when it comes to taste and cooking. If I got the flavoring wrong, no one would want to eat it and question my cooking going forward. Why do I tell you this silly story?

In Matthew 5:13, Jesus is talking about salt and its flavoring. He likens us to the salt of the earth, ***"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 trampled under people's feet."*** What do we use salt for? We know salt preserves food but more commonly it flavors food. It is really interesting what Jesus is talking about here. He is telling the crowd, you are salting the earth, and depending on what type of salt you are, will determine your effectiveness in taking the Gospel to the rest of the world.

The NIH (National Institute of Health) describes the taste of salt as "elicit sourness, sweetness, and bitterness under certain situations." The NIH has quite simply written a sermon in its definition of the taste of salt. As believers, we are going to elicit a reaction when we live

out our faith and when we share the Gospel. The question is what reaction will we elicit? Is our life reflecting of Christ that we elicit a sweetness toward the Gospel? Or as Matthew says, have we lost our flavor and we elicit a bitterness in those with who we come into contact?

We have to strive to keep the joy of our salvation so that our salt is one of sweetness. God has given us so much. Therefore, as we go out into the world, we need to be a reflection of that goodness. Be intentional and aggressive in keeping bitterness and strife out of your life because it will steal the sweet flavor of Jesus. Remember 1 Peter 2:9, ***"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."*** Let us remain a sweet salt that proclaims His excellency!



LESSON TWO

LIGHT

JAMES MANN

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."
Matthew 5:14-16

For those who live in the northern states, we understand the concept of seasons a little too well. Those who live in Michigan have heard a million times that in the winter, we are in desperate need of vitamin D supplements because we are not getting enough of it from the sun during this season. This causes seasonal depression. I often think about how difficult this is for those who live in places like Alaska or other countries where there is very little sunlight that they see in a year. During these seasons, many people also find themselves doing things to cope with the season. Sometimes this could be something positive like getting more active in the gym but it can also be something negative like building a new addictive behavior.

1. Do you notice a change in your mood during the times of year that have minimal sunlight? What does that look like for you?

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2. What do you find yourself doing to cope with these seasons?

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For a moment, I want to relate this to our walk with Christ. We are called to be this light to the world. Many of us have found ourselves in seasons of life where our relationship with God is not the priority.

We begin to put Him on the back burner and focus on what we want or the wants of those around us.

3. When this happens, what have you noticed occurring in your life?

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4. What do you do or what happens for you to pull yourself out of these seasons?

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Every time that I have found myself in one of these seasons, I feel the darkness creeping in. At the moment, life seems exciting because it is new. Slowly though, this depression and sadness begins to slip in. If we look at the earlier example, we can view God as the ultimate source of light. He gives us all that we need.

What does this mean for us in our daily lives and in the context of this passage? We live in a world where darkness is trying to take over constantly. The enemy does not want us to have a relationship with God, so he will do everything he can to create that separation. Something I always try to push with parents is that it is difficult for many children to grasp the concepts of God. What they begin to do is look at their parents and how their parents act and treat them to see these characteristics of God played out. Parents have this incredible opportunity to then tell their child, “We have a God that loves you even more than I do, and His love is a perfect kind of love.” It creates a point of being able to relate the Lord to something that a child can see in their daily lives.

5. What other godly characteristics can we teach our children based on our relationship with them?

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6. What things do we need to work on to better portray these characteristics to our children?

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We often talk about new Christians and young believers as babies in their walk with Christ. If that is how we view freshly converted believers, we can think of nonbelievers as even younger than that. When the Bible calls us to be the light of the world, we need to show nonbelievers and young believers who God is through how we act and conduct our lives. We are called to be set on a hill and act in a way that is not like the world around us. We are called to shine in the darkness. This is not an easy task. For someone that does not believe in God, we might be the only person that shows them God-like characteristics. This is something that no one is perfect at, but we are called to strive closer to this every day.

7. What are some areas of your life that you feel you are strong in shining?

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8. What are some areas of your life that you see an immediate need for improvement in order to shine the way we are called?

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This passage also mentions a concept that many of us have fallen victim to. It is sometimes effortless to act Christ-like around fellow believers. It is expected and so many of us can focus on fitting that role when the time calls for it. What about when we are not in a Christian setting? For some of us, this means work, running errands, being in an area where no one knows you at all, or even more difficult for some when we are around family. Sometimes we find ourselves in these settings and we do not want to stand out. We may also find ourselves just wanting to fit in and make it through the day. What we are doing is putting a basket over our light.

9. What situations do you find it hardest to shine in?

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10. Name one person that you specifically know needs to see your light shine because they do not have a relationship with the Lord.

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In my personal life, I have found that in these times, I begin to fall back into a season where the oxygen is not getting to my flame and my light dims. I find myself in the winter searching for happiness in the darkness. It does not make sense to cover up the thing that brings us true happiness, but the world tells us we ought to enjoy

life a little bit and that there is nothing wrong with doing that. Even worse, some Christians will tell you it is okay to fall away from God for a season because He will always accept you back. The truth is that we should never hide that light. We should always be showing that to the world. It is easier for someone in darkness to find the light when you are shining. If we are called to strive to be like Christ, we need to realize that He never took a season of life to just hide His light and enjoy the world for a bit.

FLICKERING LIGHT

LIGHT, DEVOTION 1

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." Matthew 5:14-16

My wife and I do not have a generator. For too long, power outages became an adventure. Fortunately, we had learned to have a flashlight in the nightstand for power outage emergencies (I realize that my phone is now that tool). Unfortunately, I would not have checked the batteries for some time, and of course, they were dead. That meant we were still in the dark. One year, I remember stumbling to the basement looking for our camping lantern. I was excited to find it until I realized we did not have kerosene. Meanwhile, my wife had located a candle and we had some light. It is odd to think how comforting that flickering light could be.

During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that we as believers ***"are the light of the world."*** We are to bring the Good News of the work of Jesus (in John 8:12 and 9:5, Jesus calls Himself ***"the light of the World"***) to the darkness all around us. In *The Bible Knowledge Commentary,* Louis Barbieri writes, "A light is meant to shine and give direction." That is so basic and obvious that I hesitated in documenting it; however, it is so needed and real. By Jesus calling believers ***"the light of the world,"*** He was saying that we are "to shine and give direction."

For those stranded in darkness, a floodlight is not necessary. It does not need to light up the whole sky. Even a “flickering light” gives direction. We need to dismiss the excuses of self-doubt and share the hope only Jesus can bring.

Paul explains this in 2 Corinthians 4:4, ***“In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”*** Light is not the absence of darkness, light overcomes darkness. Darkness is the absence of light. Your workplace, school, or neighborhood may be full of darkness. That is difficult, but that is why Jesus placed you there.

We are called to be and bring ***“the light”*** in the darkness.

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

LIGHT, DEVOTION 2

Sydney Kimball

If you have accepted Christ as your personal Savior then you have most likely experienced the transformative power of the Gospel. In John 8:12, Jesus tells us, ***"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows Me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."***

Since the Fall, the world has become broken and filled with darkness but Jesus assures us that we have no reason to fear because ***"[He has] overcome the world"*** (John 16:33). When we begin following Him, we receive His light and the power of the Holy Spirit dwells within us. The Holy Spirit helps to refine us. The Scriptures allow us to see what the Lord has in store for us as we continue to follow Him; He will renew our hearts and minds. As we become this new creation, we will begin to reflect the character of Christ to the world.

In Matthew 5:14, Jesus says that just like Him we are now ***"the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden."***

We are His people, now holy and set apart for the good of the Gospel. The light within us is displayed to others through our actions, through the renewal of our minds and hearts, our behaviors, attitudes, and even the way in which we treat others changes drastically.

What the ***"light of life"*** granted and entrusted to us through the Gospel is not something to keep hidden. Jesus continues on in Matthew 5:15, instructing us with what we are to do with the new found light in our lives. He tells us that just as people display the light shown from a lamp on a stand so that it may light up the whole

house, we must not allow our light to be hidden by anything. This light within us is the light of Jesus Christ Himself, the Savior of the world. He defeated death and His light overcame all darkness. He gives that same victorious light to all of us who know and love Him. With that light, we have the power to display the Gospel message to others through our actions and reflect the characteristics of Christ along with it! That light compliments our good works and lastly, Jesus tells us that with that light we may "give glory to [our] Father who is in heaven."

Just as we are not to be ashamed of the Gospel, we are not to be ashamed of our light. It is to be displayed proudly and worn as a badge of honor. I personally see it as the surest sign of our identity in Christ. If this light is of Christ, then my ownership of that same light gives me the deepest assurance that I have been adopted into God's family, through the blood and sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ.

RED BOLDED LETTERS

LIGHT, DEVOTION 3

Brianna Grunwald

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." Matthew 5:14-16

We see those red bolded words all the time. We see songs written about being ***"the light of the world."*** However, sometimes, we as Christians forget what that means. We often think that when Jesus calls us ***"the light of the world"*** we have to do some grand gesture to leave a permanent mark on the world. It is often the little things that we do to show the light of Jesus within us that resonates with people.

As I read this passage, I felt like it gave identity and then a call to action. Verse 14 says, ***"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden."*** This is Jesus saying that because we have seen, tasted, heard, and felt all that He has done for us, ultimately with His death on the cross, we now have His light within us, too.

The Gospel of John says, ***"In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it"*** (John 1:4-5). Jesus is the light of the world, so those of us who have accepted Jesus, through faith alone, have that light inside of us.

The Gospel of John also says, ***"If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you"*** (John 15:19). We are called to be set apart from the darkness of the world. Darkness will not overcome the light.

Have you ever gotten up to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night and ran into the wall, an end table, or even stepped on something you should not have? Without Jesus, there is no light and we are stumbling in the dark. Verse 15 says, ***"Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house."*** Lights are meant to lead and guide us, not be put under a basket. Our relationship with Jesus is not meant to be hidden.

Further, we are called to action in this passage. Verse 16 ends with, ***"In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."*** Jesus does not just call us to do this action in hopes of recognition, but so that those who see your action will give glory and praise to God.

As Christians, if you live to please man and gain recognition, success, or esteem, you have it all wrong. We did not sacrifice, especially by death on a cross, to gain the recognition that Jesus deserves. We are called to live selflessly in hopes that our actions will lead and guide somebody to call upon the name of Jesus.

NIGHT LIGHT

LIGHT, DEVOTION 4

Angela Sanchez

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." Matthew 5:14-16

As a child, I had many fears, but probably my biggest fear was of the dark. I hated the dark as much as someone might hate walking into a haunted house or climbing onto a large roller coaster. I do not know what started the fear or how it grew to be such a big one; but I believe it stems back to the fear that almost every human has, the fear of the unknown.

When a room is dark, you cannot see what is in front of you. If you try to walk, you may trip on something you cannot see, bump into a dresser, or worse yet, bump into an intruder or a monster who came in unbeknownst to you. Do you see how quickly our imaginations can run out ahead of us?

As an adult, I obviously do not believe in monsters anymore, but I do believe there is a spiritual realm that we cannot see with the naked eye. All around us, there is a war going on between God and the devil, God's angels and Satan's demons. We cannot see them, thus we call this darkness. Our enemy wants us to live in spiritual darkness because if we are walking in darkness, we cannot see or recognize his attacks. Those who have not come to know Christ as their Savior through the light of the Word, are stumbling through life

like that frightened child in a dark room who is tripping over things they cannot see and mostly just guessing which way to go.

My fear of the dark was handled quite easily by something that I cherished and took everywhere I went for sleepovers. It was an amazing little invention called a night light. Maybe you slept with one as a child and you outgrew the need for it, maybe you put one in your own child's bedroom to calm their fears, or maybe you have one in your bathroom so you can see your way in the middle of the night. If you have ever used one, you know how quickly it makes a difference. A room can go from pitch black to just enough light to see the elements in a room, enough to see that there are no monsters or intruders who have entered the room.

In all seriousness though, that night light can be the difference between making it safely to the bathroom without injury or tripping over something and having a nasty fall. The thing about light is that it does not take much to help you see. Even just a tiny lightbulb plugged into a wall can make it light enough to see where you are walking; however, when you are plugging in that night light, you likely are not going to plug it in behind a dresser or any other piece of furniture. No, you are likely to plug it into a wall with no obstructions so that it can cast the most light possible.

That is, in a nutshell, what this verse is saying. It is saying that you as a believer, are that night light, if you hide behind a piece of furniture, what good are you doing to light the path for someone? You must find your place in life, the place where God wants to use you and shine there.

Another great thing about light is that the more lights you turn on, the brighter the room gets, the more clearly you can see everything. That is why I believe the church is so powerful. When we work together,

we shine like a strand of Christmas lights (picture the ones in *National Lampoons Christmas Vacation*). That house lit up the entire neighborhood causing a power surge. Imagine the power surge that the church sends into the realms of darkness when we come together and shine the light of God's Word out into a dark world.

GO AND GLOW

LIGHT, DEVOTION 5

Sierra Combs

The year is 2022, and whether you like the admit it or not, the world is in utter chaos. People are fearful and hopeless. They are sad and they are angry. Corruption abounds and the truth is attacked. Wrong is right and right is wrong. Sin is celebrated. Every day I see women basically foaming at the mouth to protect "her right" to murder her unborn child. Parents hate their kids and kids hate their parents. Children are being sexually trafficked in mass on a global scale, and America is one of the worst culprits. Gender, one of the most basic scientific facts of life, is now a free for all and those who call it out or question are labeled the villain. Kids, even those under 10, are committing suicide at alarming rates. We are living in the midst of great darkness, and just when it seems like it could not get any darker, somehow it always does. It is terrible to think of these things, I know. It is easier to hide under the rock of purposeful ignorance and only choose to look at the joy in our small circle around us. I am so guilty of this. Looking at the world outside of my little bubble is oftentimes unbearable. However, is that where Jesus wants His followers to be?

In the book of Matthew chapter 5, Jesus is speaking to His disciples. Though the world looked much different at this time, it was still a sinful and chaotic, hopeless place, which is exactly what Jesus came to remedy. He reminds His followers that though they lived among great darkness, they had the answer! They had the hope and the light of Jesus. He says, ***"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others,***

so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:14-16).

Growing up in a valley of Southern California, I was completely surrounded by mountains. My bedroom overlooked a giant hill (I call it a hill but a Michigander would probably call it a mountain) with a house on top. The house was huge but because the hill was so large, it did not seem like it. In the daylight, you did not really notice the house because it blended into the hill, but at night it came alive with light! In the darkness, you could not see the hill but you could see the illuminating lights from the single house. If I would drive a bit out of town, I would drive through the mountains where there are miles and miles of nothing. However, eventually, you would turn around a bend, and there it was, a city on the mountaintop that was so bright, you could see it from miles and miles away.

This is what the Church should be. We should be so bright as we reflect the light of Jesus in our lives, that people can spot us from miles away. When we truly live for Christ, we will glow. It should be unmistakable! Yet how often do we try to hide? Perhaps you would rather blend in with the world, not wanting to stand out and reflect Christ out of fear or embarrassment. Maybe you would rather be quiet than speak the truth, or maybe you are actively letting sin dim the light. Perhaps like me, you would rather happily focus on the light by passing it on to your already lit community rather than taking it out into a world that needs Jesus. Whatever the reason, do not excuse it away in disobedience.

The world is a dark and dying place and we have the answer. Jesus, the Son of God, left His glory in Heaven to bring salvation to the lost. He alone can light the path to reconciliation with the Father, and if you are a child of God you have that light living inside of you. Go out and tell others about Him. Proclaim the Gospel of Jesus everywhere

you go. Weave it into your conversations and every aspect of the way you live your life. Go and glow! *"Hide it under a bushel, No! Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!"*

GOD'S PLAN

LIGHT, DEVOTION 6

Peter Mason

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." Matthew 5:14-16

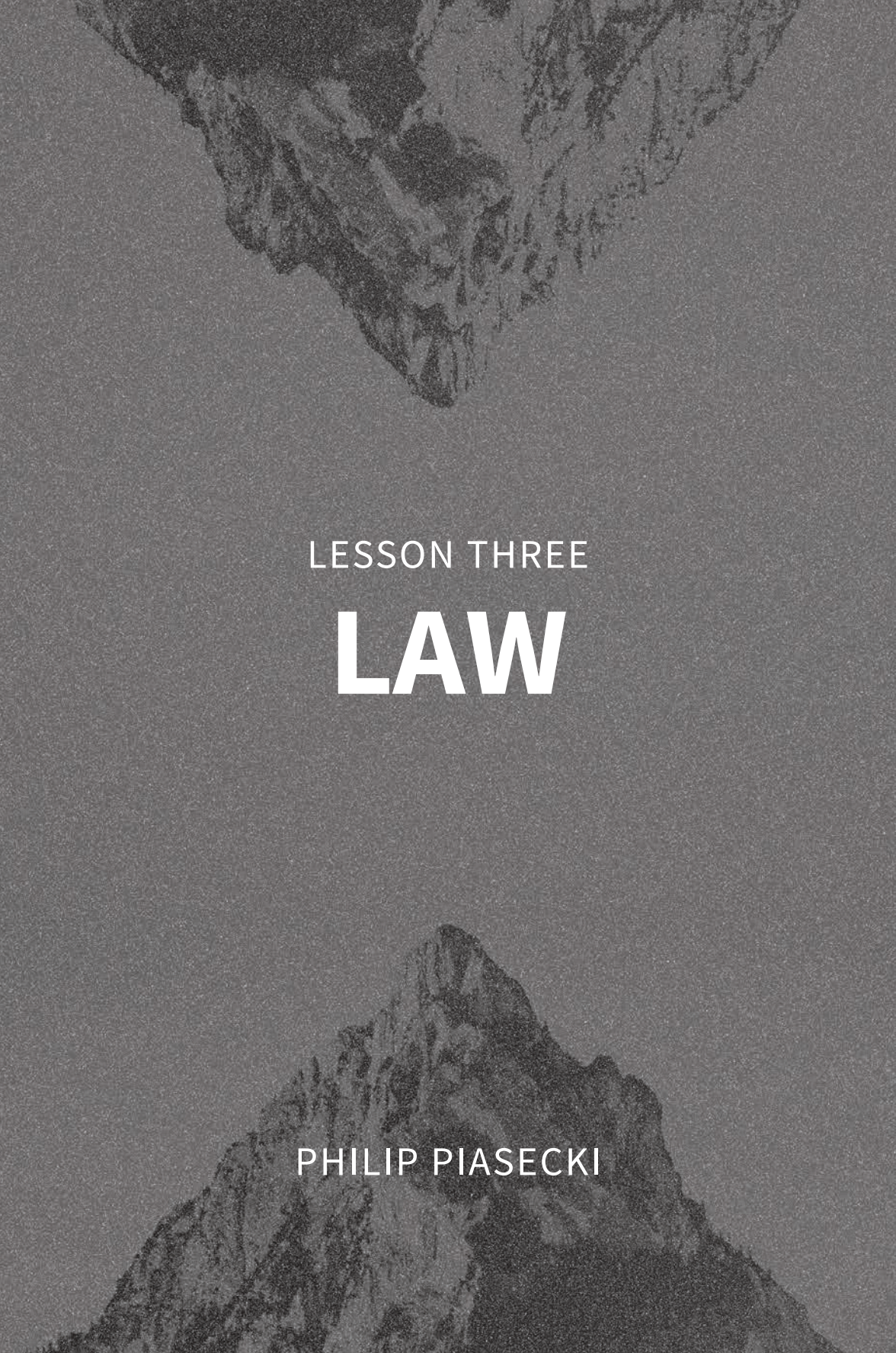
As children, many of us had dreams for what we would do and become when we "grew up." Some of us may still have those dreams for when we "grow up," even though we are well into our 30's, 40's, or older. We desire significance and meaning in our lives. However, due to the demands of ordinary life, many of us have come to the conclusion that our own significance is far smaller than what we would have hoped it would be when we were younger.

However, Jesus has come to a different conclusion for us. In these verses, Jesus gives a glorious declaration to an inconspicuous, insignificant ragtag band of disciples. The men and women He was addressing in the Sermon on the Mount were not the world's highly accomplished elite. He was speaking to ordinary people who were poor in spirit, persecuted, and downtrodden. He was speaking to men and women whose dreams for their life probably had not panned out the way they wanted either. He says to them, and to you and me, ***"You are the light of the world."***

You are God's "plan" for bringing His light and goodness to the entire world. Followers of Jesus may seem to lead ordinary lives, but those ordinary lives are the places where the Kingdom of God breaks

in and the light of God shines brightly. Think of how staggering a claim this is - Christ calls us what He called Himself. In John 8:12, Jesus says, ***"I am the light of the world."*** Here in Matthew 5:14, He includes you and me, ***"You are the light of the world."***

Your life has eternal significance because Jesus has sought you out to save you and include you in his rescue plan for the entire world. By opening up your "ordinary" life to the world around you and visibly trusting Jesus and living in simple obedience, you shine, and your Father in Heaven is glorified. That is what is in store for you today - an ordinary, but glorious day.



LESSON THREE

LAW

PHILIP PIASECKI

I have vivid memories of growing up and going to "Sunday School." One of the most popular teaching tools in the nineties was the "flannel graph." If you have no idea what I am talking about, it is definitely worth looking up. They were these little fuzzy Bible characters that would then stick to a fuzzy background scene and the teacher would use them to teach their lesson. I specifically remember these being used to illustrate Old Testament stories. You would have Moses and the parting of the Red Sea and learn about how to obey God and trust Him as Moses did. We would learn about Jonah and the whale and how we need to obey Jesus and our parents so we do not end up in the proverbial "belly of the whale." We would learn about the Israelites and the Ten Commandments and all the rules of the Law that they were expected to follow. The list of these Bible "stories" could go on and on.

1. Did you grow up in the church? Did they use a flannel graph?

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2. Whether you grew up in the church or not, what are some of your memories of your first experiences with attending church?

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I had so many amazing teachers, but sometimes these stories were taught almost primarily as moral stories, fairy tales, or just a history lesson. The truths of the Old Testament really exploded in my life when I came to the realization that everything in the Old Testament is pointing towards Jesus.

3. What are some of your favorite Old Testament historical accounts and how do you see them pointing to Jesus?

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When we read the Old Testament through the lens of Jesus, it can completely change our perspective of each and every page. Jesus addresses His relationship to the Old Testament when speaking to the crowd during the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 5. It is good to take a look at what Scripture has to say.

Matthew 5:17-20 says, ***"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."***

4. What stands out to you from this passage?

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5. Who was the audience that Jesus was speaking to?

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I think when we read the Bible, it is easy to overlook some basic things. One really simple yet important thing to always remember is that when Jesus was speaking to the Jewish people, all they had for their Scriptures was the Old Testament. I know it seems basic, but think about it. These people could not just go grab their Bibles and scroll to the next book to get more context on what Jesus was talking about. All they could do was look back at their ancient texts and compare Jesus' Word to the Word of the prophets. These prophets were their heroes, their spiritual fathers, and many of the Jesus people felt like Jesus was preaching in a way that was going to completely erase their Old Testament. However, in Matthew chapter 5, Jesus explains that what He had come to do was actually the opposite. He was the fulfillment of all these things.

6. How did Jesus fulfill the law?

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Galatians 3:23-26 says, ***"Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith."***

7. How would you say the law was the guardian until Christ came?

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In the Old Testament, the law served many important purposes; however, there are two that I want to look at in this context. One, the

law revealed and is still revealing, humanity's sinfulness and need for a Savior. When we really look at the Law, we very quickly realize that it is something that we cannot follow. Scripture tells us that if we are guilty of one part of the law, then we are guilty of all of it. The only way for someone to go to Heaven and be in the presence of a Holy God is for them to be perfect as well, and the Law reveals to us that we cannot achieve this on our own. The Old Testament Law showed the Jewish people that they needed their coming Messiah.

8. Before you became a Christian, did you think you could be "good enough" to get to Heaven? How do we think trying to achieve being perfect would impact a person?

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I see so many people striving to be good enough, and that weight just crushes them. They feel like failures every time they make a mistake. They feel like there is some cosmic power just waiting to crush them for every wrong thing. They hope and pray that one day their good deeds will outweigh their bad ones and that will grant them access to eternity. The reality is many people live this way, instead of accepting the truth that the Law is trying to show them. They cannot do it on their own. They need Jesus.

The second aspect of the Law made a way for forgiveness of sin through sacrifices. Jesus came to this Earth to become the final sacrifice for our sins. Once He died on that cross for our sin and rose again, there was no longer any need for animal sacrifices. The Old Testament practice of sacrificing for the forgiveness of sin is a picture of what Jesus was going to come to do once and for all. Jesus fulfilled this aspect of the Law when He came as a sacrifice. Now, instead of putting our faith in an animal sacrifice, we can put

our faith in Jesus Christ as the forgiveness for our sins. As Galatians chapter 3 says above, we are now ***"justified by faith."***

9. Do you ever find yourself putting your faith in your works for your salvation or your standing with God?

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My kids know that I love them, every day I make sure to tell them that. I want them to know that no matter what they do, I will always love them. When it comes to obedience, I want them to listen and obey me because they love me as well. They could easily think, "Well, I know my dad is going to love me no matter what, so I am just going to do whatever I want and I know he will forgive me." Jesus in Matthew chapter 5 reiterates the importance of the Law as well. Just because we are not saved by the Law, does not mean that we as believers should not strive every day to follow the instructions of Christ and become more like Him. If we love Him, we should want to keep His Commandments.

John 14:15 says, ***"If you love me, you will keep my commandments."***

Romans 6:1-2 adds, ***"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?"***

10. Based on Romans 6:1-2, how do you think some of the Roman Christians were approaching grace?

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It seems like they were taking the approach that the commandments of God do not matter because they knew there would be forgiveness for those sins. Paul quickly rebukes that. When we have died to sin due to our salvation, we should want to stay as far away from it as possible. We should want to show our love and honor for Christ by doing our best each and every day to follow His Commandments.

11. Do you ever find yourself falling into this place of sin as a believer?

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We see in Matthew chapter 5 that Jesus did not come to invalidate the Old Testament, but to fulfill it. We look at the stories of faith in the Old Testament and we can see the faithfulness of Christ in the midst of it. I am so thankful that He is our final sacrifice needed for our sin. God's forgiveness is not something that we have to earn through our faithfulness to the Law, but instead, we can be faithful to Christ's commandments to show Him the love that we have for our Savior.

THANK YOU

LAW, DEVOTION 1

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." Matthew 5:17

The Law was not enough. However, the Law is not irrelevant. The Law had and has value.

In Matthew 5:20, Jesus said, ***"For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."*** When Jesus said this, I believe several in the audience had a "jaw-dropping" moment. How could anyone be more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees? They tithed everything including spices (Matthew 23:23). Yet, it was not enough. In Mark chapter 10, a man asks Jesus about eternal life. Jesus responds by referencing a few of the Ten Commandments. The man confidently answers that he can check all those off on his list. Yet, Jesus then challenges him to sell his possessions and give to the poor. The man threw in the towel. He could not (or would not) live by that standard. Jesus even challenged Nicodemus (John 3) to be born again even though he was by all accounts a very godly man. While Nicodemus might have thought he was running the final lap, Jesus told him that he needed to start over.

Paul's letter to the Galatians references the Law about 27 times. Galatians 2:16 says, ***"Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law***

no one will be justified." The Law was not enough and one cannot be saved by keeping the Law. Galatians 2:21 adds, ***"I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose."***

Louis Barbieri wrote, "Jesus said He would fulfill the Law by obeying it perfectly and would fulfill the prophets' predictions of the Messiah and His kingdom." The Law set a standard that only God Himself could keep. Jesus did it and in doing so announced that He was the promised Messiah and Savior.

The Law was not enough. However, the Law is not irrelevant. The Law had and has value.

Jesus said, ***"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them"*** (Matthew 5:17). Jesus fulfilled the Law. He did not ignore or demean it. The Law was not His enemy or even a hindrance for Him.

I like how Warren Wiersbe addressed the topic, "Jesus made it clear that He had come to honor the Law and help God's people love it, learn it, and live it." We too are called to holiness, but not as a means to salvation. Our good actions should be as a thank you to God for saving us (by grace through faith) and as a testimony to others of the changed life that Jesus offers.

"So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith." Galatians 3:24

LAW OR GUIDELINES?

LAW, DEVOTION 2

Mark Pittenger

Have you ever heard the phrase, "You are only breaking the law if you get caught?" I hear this all the time and see it practiced every day. This is probably most evident on the highway. When I am on my way to work in the morning, I often feel like I am driving in a NASCAR race! If you choose to follow the speed limit, cars will fly past you like you are parked! This reminds me of a scene from the movie *"Pirates of the Caribbean"* when Elizabeth calls out Captain Barbossa for breaking the pirate's code. He then replies, "The code is more so guidelines than it is rules."

However, in Matthew 5:17-20, we see Jesus say, ***"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."***

Much like "the church culture" today, the Pharisees were very good at telling others what the Law said and pointing out how the people were breaking it; all the while not living righteously themselves. We can see this later in Matthew 23:27-28 (NIV) when Jesus says, ***"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the***

outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness."

Too often we hear Christians say, "I can live how I want because Jesus will forgive me." However, we can see clearly that Jesus is saying otherwise. We should not just know and teach the laws and commandments, but live in a way that is an example of them. Jesus came not only as the sacrifice for the sins of all humanity but also as an example of how we should live. Our lives should be a reflection of Jesus' love, forgiveness, and righteousness, with the understanding that we are not perfect but have the promise of one day reaching that perfection when we stand in His glory!

So, are you living, to the best of your ability, according to the laws, or like the pirates, do you look at them more as guidelines? I challenge you to follow the example left to us by Jesus.

"Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked." 1 John 2:6

LAW - JESUS - LAW

LAW, DEVOTION 3

Patrick Bicknell

A common misconception that Christians tend to believe is that we do not need the Law anymore. In one sense, this is true. We no longer need to fulfill the requirements of the Law to gain a right standing before God and be justified in the eyes of God. However, that does not mean Jesus came to abolish the Law or to contradict Himself. Instead, He teaches us a couple of principles about the Law and Scripture that is very important for us to see in this section of the Sermon on the Mount.

First and foremost, our great promise comes in Matthew 5:17 when Jesus says, ***"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."*** When Jesus says ***"the Law or the Prophets,"*** He is speaking about the Old Testament. The Jews commonly used this phrase to encompass all of the Scripture that God had given them. Therefore, Jesus is teaching us that everything that Scripture had to say in the Old Testament was all pointing to Him. What is so amazing about Jesus saying He came to fulfill them is that He fulfilled all of the predictive prophecy, the moral and legal demands of the Law, and the penalty of the Law and Prophets. In doing this, He paved the way for salvation for all of us so that it no longer depended on our ability to be perfect, but only on His finished work.

However, He does not stop there. He does not say, "Well, I finished the work for you guys; go do whatever you want!" Instead, He emphasizes the importance of surrendering to God and obeying His Word. In Matthew 5:19, He says, ***"Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to***

do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

The call to follow Jesus is not a call to find amazing grace, sweet forgiveness, and then continue living in our sin as if we have a get out of jail free card. The call to follow God is to obey Him out of a heart that has tasted and seen how great our Jesus is. The one who has truly been saved by the Gospel of Jesus Christ sees the fulfillment of the Law in Christ and the righteousness He provides and seeks to obey and follow the Word as He did. A quote that I read that perfectly sums up this passage of Scripture reads, "The law sends us to Jesus to be justified, because it shows us our inability to please God in ourselves. But after we come to Jesus, He sends us back to the law to learn the heart of God for our conduct and sanctification."

WOE TO YOU

LAW, DEVOTION 4

Donna Fox

The scribes and the Pharisees were Jewish leaders and teachers during Jesus' time on Earth. They talked the religious game, but their hearts and motives were not godly.

Matthew 5:19-20 says, ***"Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."***

In the culture at that time, the scribes and Pharisees were the "standard" to follow for behavior. Yet they were hypocrites, outwardly conforming to the Law, but inwardly having impure hearts. Matthew 23:3 says, ***"For they preach, but do not practice."*** Their "walk" did not match their "talk." Jesus is saying that our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. Theirs should not be the "standard." Jesus is the "standard." He is our example, what we strive to be like.

Righteousness, and being "good enough" to get into Heaven, can only come through Jesus. Being a good person in and of itself will not get you into Heaven. Acting righteous, like the Pharisees, will not get you into Heaven. Knowing the Law or Bible inside and out, like the scribes, will not get you into Heaven. Heaven's standard of righteousness is beyond human capability. It can only come through Jesus. You must accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior and have a

personal relationship with Him. He must be a part of your daily life, not just an hour a week on Sunday morning. It is through a changed heart with the right motivations that you will ***"exceed[s] that of the scribes and Pharisees"*** and ***"enter the kingdom of heaven."***

Matthew 23:13, 15, 16, 23, 25, 27, and 29 say, ***"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!"*** It was repeated seven times, which means we should pay particular attention. This is important!

Scribes and Pharisees were very knowledgeable about Jewish law and tradition. They scrutinized Jesus and His teachings very carefully. Yet in the end, Jesus triumphed over all!

Is Jesus saying to you, "Woe to you {insert your name here}?" Or is He saying, ***"Well done, good and faithful servant?"*** (Matthew 25:21). If you are not sure, I invite you to reach out to any of The River Church staff to discuss this further. Your eternity depends on it!

RULES AND FREEDOM

LAW, DEVOTION 5

Pastor David Wilson

Sign, sign, everywhere a sign
Blockin out the scenery, breaking my mind
Do this, don't do that, can't you read the sign?

The Five Man Electric Band sang this in 1970 to a culture that was shifting to a lack of trust in their leadership. The youth were questioning everything they had been told and jumping past the conservative guidelines set by previous generations. What if they could have had no rules at all; would that have been the freeing answer for their "oppression?"

Matthew 5:17-20 records Christ teaching about rules and guidelines to give security to our lives. I believe that some may have believed that Jesus was going to get rid of the whole law, but instead, He states in verse 17 that He came to ***"fulfill them."***

Jesus fulfilled all the laws through living a perfect life and not offending even in one. It was necessary, per the Law, that the sacrificial lamb be perfect for the sacrifice of the people's sins; He was worthy. Jesus presents a challenge in verse 20 to any who may call themselves His disciples. He said that our righteousness must exceed the scribes and Pharisees to get into Heaven. That is disconcerting since they knew all the rules and laws and even if we miss one we deserve the punishment.

The fourth Beatitude says that we are blessed when we hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matthew 5:6). Righteousness is merely holiness. Do we desire holiness? Are we pursuing holiness in our

hearts, minds, souls, and with all our strength? If we are to achieve holiness that exceeds the scribes and Pharisees, we must recognize that there is security in the standards God gave us. The only security blanket we can have is the grace extended to humanity by Jesus' sacrifice. When we place our faith in Jesus and trust His deity, God chooses to see the payment and forgive our debt of sin.

The Five Man Electric Band sang of their displeasure to rules and regulations, but as believers, we can find security and love in the Lord's rules and regulations; they create the framework for righteousness. Please revisit the question from earlier, "Would removing all the rules allow freedom to people's lives?" Rules and guidelines provide security and show love. When people are not afforded rules and guidelines, they try to make their own way and they fail to hit perfection.

LOVE GOD, LOVE OTHERS

LAW, DEVOTION 6

John Stone

"Do not presume that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke of a letter shall pass from the Law, until all is accomplished!" Matthew 5:17-18 (NASB)

What does it mean for us that Jesus fulfilled the Law? In order to gain an understanding and, more importantly, live lives that are pleasing to the Lord, it is helpful to look at how and why God gave His people the Law in the first place.

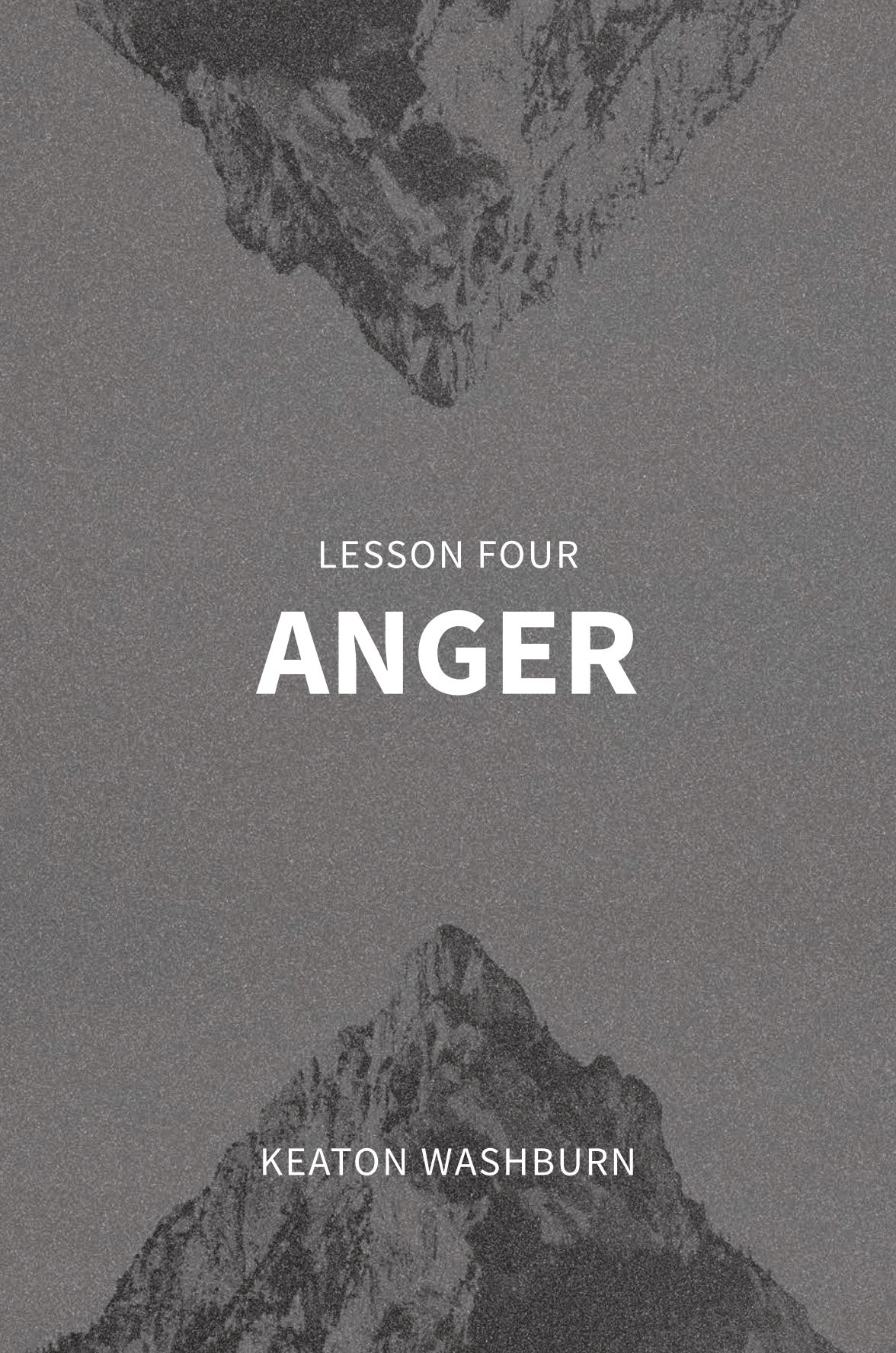
YAHWEH, The Lord God, Creator of Heaven and Earth, descended on Mt. Sinai in catastrophic majesty to reveal the Law on stone tablets ***"written by the finger of God"*** (Exodus 19; 31:18). God leads and sustains His chosen people on their way to the Promised Land, and en route, Moses reminds the people of God's commandments. They are to love the Lord with all their heart and all their soul and all their might. They are to be a holy (set apart) nation, a light to the pagan world that surrounds them. This knowledge of the Father's choosing them and their gratitude for His rescue from slavery in Egypt to a future promise of blessing are the reasons they are to obey all He commanded (Deuteronomy 6:4-25).

These amazing events are a foreshadowing of the work Christ accomplished on our behalf. Jesus rescued us from slavery to sin and death and transferred us into the covenant promise of blessing and eternal life with Him (Colossians 1:10-14). In 1 Peter 2:9 (NASB), Peter explains, we are to be ***"a chosen race, a royal priesthood,***

a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." God foretold this promise in Jeremiah 31:33 (NASB), ***"For this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,' declares the Lord, 'I will put My law within them and write it on their heart; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.'"***

During Jesus' earthly ministry, a very religious man, a master of the Law, asked Jesus what he needs to do to ***"inherit eternal life"*** (Luke 10:25). When Jesus asked him what God's Word says about it, he does not quote a long list of dos and don'ts, but instead shows that he has an understanding of God's purpose behind the Law; that the Law exists for his good as a demonstration of God's love. The intended result is love for the Lord with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love other people. Jesus affirms the man's answer, ***"Do this and you will live"*** (Luke 10:28 NASB). It seems simple enough, right? However, the man already knows, like we do, that because of our sinfulness, he will not be able to do it. No one loves perfectly, nor can we on this side of Heaven. So, like we tend to do, he grasped for a loophole to excuse his inability instead of throwing himself at the feet of Jesus and humbly asking for help. In the same way today we need to move beyond a simple intellectual understanding of God's purpose for the Law to joyful obedience. Jesus said, ***"If you love Me, you will keep My commandments"*** (John 14:15 NASB). Jesus demonstrated the perfect love that is required to fulfill the Law and inherit eternal life - a living and dying love. This is where we need to be; at the feet of Jesus praising Him for His perfect undeserved love for us, thanking Him for rescuing us from our slavery to sin, learning His sacrificial love for people, and then going out and doing the same (Luke 10:37). He has shared that love with us freely, and by the Spirit, has given us a new heart that is capable of the same kind of love (1 John 2:3-8).

The Law, written by the finger of God, the Holy Spirit, has remained consistent in its delivery and intention throughout the ages. It is not about a list of dos and don'ts. It is about love; love for God and love for people. Through it the Lord reveals Himself to us as though He were again descending before our eyes on Mt. Sinai. By it we see our need for Christ and His fulfillment on our behalf because, like the man in Luke chapter 10, when we measure ourselves by it, we fall far short of our Father's perfection. By the Law's standard of love, we learn how to live holy lives that are pleasing to the Lord and, in doing so, shine as lights in a dark world. We should be thankful and praise God for giving us the Law and for sharing His love with us so that we can share that love with others (1 John 4:19).



LESSON FOUR

ANGER

KEATON WASHBURN

I am an over-thinker in every sense of the word. Before I send a text, I read and reread it. When I receive a text, I read into it much further than the sender intended. When someone makes a comment about something I did or did not do, I mull over what I could have done better to ensure I do not make the same mistake again. My wife, Haleigh, on the other hand, moves much quicker than I do and does not often get stuck in her thoughts. She is usually decisive and quick in making decisions.

1. Do you identify as more of an over-thinker or as someone who tends to be impulsive? Why do you think that is true of you?

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2. How has your over-thinking or impulsiveness helped you or hurt you?

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Read Matthew 5:21-26.

3. What is your response to Jesus' strong words? Are Jesus' commands here something you make a habit of?

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In verses 21 and 22, Jesus did something that He makes a habit of throughout His teachings. He took an Old Testament law (***"You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment"***) and upped the ante in saying, ***"But I say to you."*** We see Jesus

do this six times in the book of Matthew and one other time in Luke chapter 6. Craig Keener, in his commentary on Matthew, calls this putting a "fence" around the Law. He points out that in doing this "Jesus addresses not just how we act but who we are." The law says not to murder, but Jesus calls His followers to not even be angry.

4. How have you experienced someone caring more about how you act and what you do rather than who you are? How did that affect you?

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5. What standard does Jesus set for his followers in verse 22? Are you guilty of expressing anger through your words?

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For a long time, being an over-thinker, I did not think that I struggled with anger. My actions and words tended to be measured. However, over the last couple of years, God has convicted me of my anger and lack of patience. For years, my anger was internal and it rarely manifested itself in lashing out. Yet, God's Word makes it clear in Luke 6:45, ***"For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks."*** (This verse is in the same chapter of Luke's recording of the Sermon on the Mount.) I think the temptation for people (like me) that tend to overthink is to assume you have got this in check because anger has not caused you to lash out yet. Or, we tend to point the finger at more impulsive people and shift Jesus' words to someone else. However, Jesus is getting at the heart of the issue, the human heart. He does not just care about what we do, but who we are.

6. How have you tried to hold anger in? Has that worked? Did you reach a boiling point?

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7. Why does Jesus take this a step further than just how His followers act? How does this challenge your view of God and His expectations?

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The word that Jesus uses that we translate as "brother" in verse 22 is almost always used in relation to brothers and sisters in Christ, those who are the church. Thinking of the church, I see Jesus' words in verse 22 as especially poignant behind one another's back. I do not see too many Christians insulting and calling each other fools to their faces. This name-calling and insult-throwing usually happen behind the person's back.

8. How have you seen gossip hurt those in the church? Why is it so hurtful?

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Psychologists believe there are two main catalysts for gossip being believed and moving quickly: when it confirms a bias that the gossiper has about the one being gossiped about or when those discussing the information are already envious of the one being gossiped about. I do not know about you, but that reminds me of the hallways of high

school. Yet, so often, we do exactly this. Instead of putting out the fire of gossip, we continue it for these reasons.

Jesus is very clear that there is no place for gossip and insults within His church. He says that the penalty for insults and impulsive, angry words is the same as murder - eternal separation from God in Hell. He does not say that anger is as bad as murder but makes it clear that the penalty for both is the same.

What R.T. France says about this matter is right on. Christians are "to submit our thoughts about other people, as well as the words they give rise to, to God's penetrating scrutiny."

Read Matthew 5:23-24.

Jesus does not lighten up here. He continues to raise the standard of the Law by calling believers to examine themselves before worship, even if they are not the angry ones. In saying, if you ***"remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go,"*** Jesus is putting the onus on the reader. If you have done something to make someone angry, before worshiping God, reconcile with them!

"First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." The order is intentional by Jesus. He is echoing many of the Old Testament prophets that repeated over and over the worthlessness of worship without purity.

Amos speaks of this very strongly as he records the words of the Lord, ***"I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon***

them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:21-24).

Though we oftentimes take worship and communion lightly, God does not. Paraphrasing Amos, God does not want our worship if it is not from a pure heart that reflects the character of God. It is not that Christians have to be perfect, but we must repent of sin and reconcile with those we have caused anger in. Before worship, before communion, and before spending time with God, we have to be right with other people. If we are not right with those around us, we cannot be right with God.

9. What does it look like to reconcile with someone? Is there someone you have caused to sin or gossiped about that you need to make right with?

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10. Why does God treat worship and sin so seriously? Does the church treat worship and sin the same way God does?

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Read Matthew 5:25-26.

Jesus concludes this section by showing the possible end result of anger - imprisonment. Anger that is not dealt with will not dissipate; it will grow. Gossip that is not confessed will destroy the one gossiping or the one being gossiped about. God does not take sin lightly, so why do we?

YEAST

ANGER, DEVOTION 1

Gary Wright

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms 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. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny." Matthew 5:21-26 ,

Every year for Thanksgiving, my wife Kim makes dinner rolls. They are delicious! The rolls start as a little blob of dough on Kim's baking sheet, but the warm room temperature air activates the yeast in the dough and the yeast causes the dough to grow into some amazing-looking dinner rolls ready for the oven.

We all become angry from time to time, but if we hold on to that anger and allow it to settle in, it will become like the yeast in my wife's dinner rolls. It will continue to grow until it dominates our life.

A great example of this type of anger is a man named Haman from the Book of Esther. Haman was angry that a Jew named Mordecai would not bow and pay respect to him (Haman was prime minister

of Persia). Haman's anger grew so much that it poisoned his life. Haman was rich and had a wife and children. He had been promoted by the king to second in charge in the Persian empire, yet notice Haman's own words, ***"Yet all this is worth nothing to me, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate"*** (Esther 5:13). Haman held on to his anger, let it settle in, and it consumed his life.

If we hold on to our anger it will begin to grow until it affects every part of our life. Anger needs to be dealt with honestly and confessed to God as sin. Then we must go and settle the matter with whomever we have the problem.

Jesus says in our text to ***"Come to terms quickly with your accuser,"*** even before you come and worship. He says, ***"Leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."***

"Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil." Ephesians 4:26-27

TO ALL PRIESTS

ANGER, DEVOTION 2

John Stone

"Therefore, if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering." Matthew 5:23-24 (NASB)

Did you know that you and I are priests to our God? What an honor! What a privilege to be allowed to serve the Lord of Heaven and Earth! We no longer burn animals on altars of stone, but the "soothing aromas" of our sacrifices, those of thanksgiving, praise, worship, service, and good works, still rise to Him in the same way that the smoke of the Old Testament sacrifices did. The priests under the old covenant were commanded to keep the fire on the altar burning continually; it was never to go out (Leviticus 6:12-13). In the same way, Jesus tells us that if we want to follow Him we are to deny ourselves, take up our crosses daily, and follow Him (Luke 9:23). As Jesus laid down (sacrificed) His rights and privileges and became a servant to all. We are to continually do the same and show the world what the sacrificial love of Christ is like (Colossians 1:24). What an impact we could make for the Lord in our families, communities, and nation if we could model real Christ-like love! To the unbelieving world, it would appear as strange as if we were slaughtering bulls and goats on a pile of rocks!

In Matthew 5:23-24, Jesus is not introducing a new idea. He is reaffirming the standard that has been in place since God first revealed it to His people through Moses back on the east side of the Jordan River. Priests who were to come to the altar to offer sacrifices

were to be clean; they were to be washed. God gave a standard of what was required. Examples were made of priests who presumed to offer "strange fire" with the warning given for all time that those who would come near to the Lord should treat Him as holy (Leviticus 10:1-3).

From the beginning of time, He has been very specific about what is pleasing and what is presumptuous, who may ***"ascend the hill of the Lord"*** (Psalm 24:3-5) and who will be rejected like Cain (Genesis 4:3-7). If we are to present our life as an offering to the Lord, Who is holy and righteous, we need to be mindful of the way we present it. If we have dirt on our hands or mud on our face because we hurt another believer, we should go to that person, repent, and set things right with them before presuming to bring our offering to the Lord under false pretenses (James 4:8). God is not fooled by an outward show when our consciences are not clean (Hebrews 10:19-25), and neither is the world we are trying to reach with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. True sacrificial love is not hypocritical or two-faced (James 3:8-9). We cannot claim to love and serve God while injuring, backstabbing, or taking advantage of other people (1 John 4:20). He alone is worthy of receiving praise and honor and glory, and it is an indescribable privilege for us to be able to raise holy hands to the One who loved us first. We, as His chosen and holy priests, should be constantly offering up sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving on the altar of our hearts (Hebrews 13:15), but unless the priest is qualified the offering will be rejected. We need to make it a priority this week to seek out those with whom we need to reconcile. Pave the way with prayer. Ask the Lord to soften hearts (particularly our own) and allow us to find favor and forgiveness with those we have hurt (Romans 12:18).

We are called as royal, holy, and chosen, as priests to our God. There is no longer a curtain separating God from men because of

the reconciling work of Jesus on the cross. He has given us the amazing privilege of being able to offer our lives as sacrifices to Him. Our God is holy and worthy of all our sacrifice, and He is jealous of our offerings. We must treat our position in Christ seriously and be careful not to let sin and disunity extinguish the fire on our life's altar (Leviticus 6:12-13).

"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." 1 Peter 2:9 (NASB)

REDEEMING ANGER

ANGER, DEVOTION 3

Ferdinand Sanders

Growing up as the older brother, I felt like my younger brother had a natural gift of pushing my buttons just to the point of eliciting a reaction out of me - a reaction that ultimately led to me getting in trouble. I do not think there is a sibling relationship in existence where there has not been some number of arguments, and if we are being honest, most of the time over something completely trivial and meaningless. In most cases growing up, these "fights" are ultimately just small "hiccups." They are not detrimental to the relationship, and can even cause them to grow stronger. When I think back to those fights, I realize now how revealing they were.

If you think about it, what is going on when you or someone else gets angry? Whether "right" or "wrong," anger is a result of something happening that goes against what you believe. It strikes a chord with you, it reveals a passion. Anger is almost always seen as a negative - but I think there is potential for the concept to be redeemed. If sin is separation from God, as Christians we should truly flee from sin. Run in the opposite direction. The concept of sin or sinning against God should cause us to be angry. I am not saying, "Anger is good." Nor am I proposing that we should default to "see red" as much as possible. However, what happens when we flip the script and follow the lead from Matthew 5:21-26? We are told here to first be reconciled to our brother, even before we make an offering to the Lord. How can we be at peace and in harmony with the will of God if we cannot be at peace and in harmony with our brothers and sisters here on Earth?

Recently as a staff, we have been studying Romans chapter 12. In this chapter of Paul's letter to God's beloved in Rome, there is

a portion of Scripture that has been labeled “the marks of a true Christian.” It is here that he writes, ***“Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ To the contrary, ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good”*** (Romans 12:16-21). I often find these verses coming to mind as they are somehow both challenging and simple. Live in harmony with one another. Repay no one evil for evil. So far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. We should make that our prayer.

CREATING PEACEFUL RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS AND GOD

ANGER, DEVOTION 4

Emilou Irwin

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms 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. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny." Matthew 5:21-26 ,

Take a moment to think about the most important relationships in your life? What does that look like? It most likely looks very peaceful with few conflicts, right? What keeps it from falling apart? It probably is not anger, talking about them behind their back, or a conflict that you would not let go of holding it together. I guess it is peace and forgiveness.

It is good to break this down starting with anger. During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses anger in its largest form through murder. Matthew 5:21-22 says, ***"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever***

insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." Yet, we also see Jesus address it in its simplest form - thoughts of anger. If we read that again, we see that the punishment is the ***"hell of fire."*** This is the opposite of a peaceful relationship with God, it is filled with torment and unrest. So the first step towards maintaining peaceful relationships is to guard our hearts against evil thoughts and desires.

Now we need to guard more than just our hearts to create peaceful relationships, we also need to guard our speech. Guarding our speech means more than just avoiding using profanity or the Lord's name in vain, it also means using our words to reconcile with our brothers and sisters in Christ in a manner that is God-honoring. Jesus describes it through a brief scene in which someone leaves their offering to go and be reconciled with his brother before entering the presence of God. In Matthew 5:23-24, we find this story, ***"So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."***

There is one more important thing that allows us to maintain a peaceful relationship, it is resolving conflicts quickly. Now you would not let an open wound continue to be filled with dirt and bleed for hours, the same concept applies here. When a conflict arises it creates a new kind of wound and the longer we leave it exposed to the elements the higher the chance it gets infected. This infection could lead to needing outside help to heal or even having to remove the area affected by the wound. Jesus explains this in a more formal illustration in Matthew 5:25-26. It says, ***"Come to terms 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. Truly, I say to you, you will***

never get out until you have paid the last penny." It makes it clear that the quicker an issue is dealt with, the less damage that will be done.

Maintaining peaceful relationships takes intentionality. So to maintain peaceful relationships we need to guard our hearts, guard our speech, and resolve our conflicts quickly. In maintaining peaceful relationships in our earthly walk, we are keeping peace in our heavenly walk. This is because our discords with each other get in the way and hinder our relationship with God. Now as you go throughout your day, take a moment to resolve any conflicts that you have been putting off taking care of, guard your heart, and guard your speech.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

ANGER, DEVOTION 5

Patrick Bicknell

The Sermon on the Mount is one of the most revolutionary words spoken by the Son of God that confronts the heart of our entire lives. Almost everybody, both worldly and Christian, is fixated on the external things of life. Whether it is how big someone's house is, or if it is how much you serve and spend time at a church, what you reflect externally in your life is what most people think matters. However, Jesus is more focused on the heart, and He makes it clear here when talking about anger.

I think anger is something that we all can relate to. Unless you are a hermit who lives on the tip of the North Pole, odds are you have had an interaction with a person and have dealt with anger. I know for myself when I deal with anger, I am more focused on not letting that anger out externally rather than fixing the emotions going on inside of me. It causes me to feel better about myself because I did not "sin" in my anger. However, that is not what we are called to do as Christ-followers. After Jesus brings up the commandment that we are not to murder people, He says, ***"But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgement"*** (Matthew 5:22). Jesus tells His people that they know we are not to commit murder, but what is the emotion that causes that sin? Where does that sin start? It starts with the small things that people would consider insignificant. Obviously, Jesus is not saying anger and murder are the same thing. What He is trying to do is tell us of the significance of our hearts. Christ does not just want to be a part of our lives, He wants to have our whole lives. God wants to conform us into the image of Christ, and present us holy and blameless (Colossians 1:22). The reason this is so significant is that it directly affects our worship.

After talking about the severity of anger and the heart, Jesus goes on to talk about reconciliation and worship. He says, ***"So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother"*** (Matthew 5:23-24). Jesus is not talking about the small chance that you are at a physical altar with a physical gift, and maybe remember a problem you have with your brother. He is talking about our lives. We are a living sacrifice to God. We offer gifts of praise, prayer, singing, and worship to God daily and if we are to do this we need to make sure our heart is in the right place. How can we worship God and thank Him for forgiveness if we are not forgiving our brothers and sisters in Christ? If we are to worship God properly and be conformed to the image of Christ, we need to make sure our hearts are in the right place. For where our heart is, there also is our worship.

ARE YOU ANGRY?

ANGER, DEVOTION 6

Kyle Wendel

Have you ever been angry with someone? I feel like I can say for us all, yes we have been angry with someone else many times. I can think of countless stories of where I have been angry with someone. Jesus takes a bold take on anger in Matthew 5:21-22, ***"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire."***

First, Jesus refers to the Old Testament where it says do not murder. I think most of us have heard this before and I would feel like we all agree that murder is wrong. Jesus takes it a whole level deeper though. We see this throughout Scripture that God looks at the intentions of our hearts. We may not commit murder on the outside, but what about the inside? Where are our hearts at? Jesus is saying here that it is wrong to be angry with someone. Anger typically entails a desire to damage or destroy a person. We see this play out in personal ways and sometimes can even lead to murder. We also see how calling others fools, and meaning it, is closely related to anger. It can represent an attack on a person's character or identity.

When we have anger stored up against someone, it destroys us and it destroys how we see that person. Instead, when we have a problem with someone we should go to them and try to hash it out. Anger only leads to bitterness. Bitterness also destroys. We cannot sit on our anger and let it fester inside of us.

Jesus died on the cross so that we can be set free from sin. Let us run to Him when we are tempted or caught in sin. We must give it all up to Him and attempt to live peaceably amongst all. We must live a life that is always looking back to the cross. Anger does not point to the cross but to ourselves. We are doomed if we look to ourselves only.

Do you struggle with anger? Who are you angry with? Is there someone specific that you need to go hash things out with? Galatians 5:22-23 says, ***"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law."*** How can the Fruit of the Spirit help us with our anger?

James 1:19 adds, ***"Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger."*** It is not easy being slow to anger, let us have self-control in Christ.



LESSON FIVE

LUST

PASTOR CHUCK LINDSEY

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell."
Matthew 5:27-30 (NKJV)

1. Do you remember something you really wanted as a child (Red Ryder BB gun)?

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Lust is, by definition, always wrong. It is a wrong or sinful (often sexual) desire for something that is not ours. It is not ours, yet we want it. This is lust. In contrast, to desire what is ours is not wrong. A husband should desire his wife and a wife her husband. This is God's design and it is not sinful. It is "the marriage bed… that is undefiled" (Hebrews 13:4 NKJV). You cannot lust for what is rightfully yours. This is why it is "desire" and not "lust" when a husband desires his wife. It is right and not sinful.

2. What other things do people lust for?

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3. What else could someone desire?

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In dealing with sin, have you ever noticed that Jesus does not begin where we do? As people, we often begin with the "end" of something. What do I mean? Well, we say that it is murder when the actual deed is done. When anger has reached its final state and it results in the killing of another person, we call that murder. Jesus backs up, and starts at the beginning of the process and says that the beginning of murder is when there is anger in our hearts towards someone else. Again, we call it adultery when a husband or wife is physically intimate with someone other than their spouse. Jesus backs up and says that to look at another person with desire is the beginning of adultery. It has just not reached its culmination yet.

4. What other areas could be avoided if we first got to the root of the problem?

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This is why He says what He says in verse 27, ***"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.'"*** Do you see what I am saying? This is where people often start. However, Jesus says in verse 28, ***"But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart."*** Here Jesus focuses on the beginning and says that the process has already begun.

Now, in doing this, Jesus is telling us how dangerous these things really are. He is telling us to be careful with what we allow to "begin"

to grow in our lives. Seeds planted, grow. Anger turns into murder over time and through cultivation. Anger, hurt, and unforgiveness eventually mature into hate and a desire for harm to come to the one we despise. Lust is the first seed of adultery. If given enough time and attention, adultery is where it leads. Therefore, Jesus is warning us to be careful over the beginning stages.

5. What are some practical ways to maintain a pure heart and mind?

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6. What are some Bible verses that could help in the battle?

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From there, Jesus tells us how to deal with these things. We must learn to pull up weeds quickly! He says in verses 29-30, ***"If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell."*** Pluck it out? Cut it off? Cast it away? These are really aggressive responses. That is the point! Jesus is telling us to deal with these things when they are small, early on, and to do it aggressively. It means that if we do not, things will begin to grow and get away from us before we know it.

7. How do we help children stop negative patterns?

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8. How do we help children develop positive patterns?

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I have always thought that lust should be seen in the same way that we see fire. It should be dealt with in the same way! We are careful with fire because it is so destructive! Fire in a fireplace is a good thing. It is a blessing and a great benefit to us. However, fire, even a little fire, on your carpet or couch is a very bad thing. It is highly destructive. If it is not dealt with quickly, aggressively, the whole house will burn down. Likewise, desire within marriage is a good thing. Like a warm fire in its fireplace. It is a blessing and a great benefit to both the husband and wife. However, lust (a desire for someone else) is like fire on your carpet! It must be dealt with quickly or it will burn everything to the ground.

9. How can lust burn someone's life down?

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It has been famously said, "Sin will cost you more than you wanted to spend, take you further than you wanted to go, and keep you longer than you wanted to stay." As a pastor, I have found this to be tragically true. I have sat with so many people who thought that they could hold fire. One of them thought that they could control it. They thought that they could handle it, only to find that it burned them

badly and their lives to the ground. Jesus' warning here is to be quick to deal with sin!

10. How can you help someone who seems to be struggling with an aspect of lust?

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Lastly, when thinking about things like this, it is always wise to ask, "Where will this end?" This is a good question to ask ourselves when we think about doing something. "Where will this end? Where will this take me? What is the end of this thing?" It is wise to ask such questions. However, so often as people, we do not do this and the result is tragic. We often evaluate things from what they look like at the beginning and not where they end up. We wonder, "What is a little anger?" Murder is the end of it. Some ask, "So my eyes wander a bit, what's the big deal?" It is the beginning of adultery against your spouse.

11. What should one do who has fallen?

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LOOK BUT DON'T TOUCH

LUST, DEVOTION 1

John Rigg

When I was a little boy, one of my favorite places to go was the Ben Franklin Store. The local "five and dime" as they were called. This was a place of wonder to me. I would spend months saving my allowance just for the chance to shell it out on a toy or some candy. My favorite part of the store was the plastic model aisle. This area was filled with Mattel, Revel, and AMT kits begging me to purchase and take them home to be assembled. The problem was, however, sometimes we would go into the store before I had enough money saved and I could only walk the aisle dreaming of having one of those kits. Knowing this as we entered the store, my mother would let me head that way but not before commanding, "It's ok to look, but don't touch!" Apparently, it was okay with mom if I just stood there longing and looking, as long as I did not touch.

I could not help but think about my mother's mandate, "It's ok to look, but don't touch!" when revisiting the following teaching by Jesus. He said, ***"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart"*** (Matthew 5:27–28).

Our Lord was taking this opportunity to teach His disciples about a lustful look, its relationship to adultery, and the seriousness of it. When Jesus said, ***"You have heard it said,"*** He was making reference to the teaching of the religious leaders of the day. The Pharisees were most likely instructing people in the Law of Moses which forbids adultery and defined death as its penalty. However, the

Pharisees must have been taking the “it’s ok to look, but don’t touch” approach to adultery for Jesus to refine their teaching.

The English word lust used here is “epitumeo” in Greek. It means “to set the heart upon, or to long for.” Jesus is saying that everyone who looks at another with lustful intent has already committed adultery with that person in their heart. Notice the past tense of the phrase, ***“already committed adultery.”*** If a person “longs for or looks upon another” other than their spouse, the act of adultery has already been committed. Although this act is internal, committed with the heart, the result is the same as if it had been committed physically. It is sin and is worthy of death.

Jesus is teaching that “it is not ok to look and not touch” when it comes to lust and adultery.

As with all sin, death is the penalty (James 1:13-15). Looking with lustful intent brings death into our marriages, into our relationship with God, and into our relationship with others.

So what is the cure? Heart surgery! One’s heart must be changed; repentance and submission to the will of God is always the cure.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:3–5, Paul writes, ***“For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God.”***

ENTERTAINING THOUGHTS

LUST, DEVOTION 2

Katrina Young

"Don't entertain the thought." That is what my mentor (JoAnne) would say to me every time she would coach me through a crisis. "You are sending out invitations to a party that you are hosting in your mind, and you are dancing with sin." Her words seemed so harsh to me at the time, but I am so thankful for the wisdom and patience that she had with me. I was a new believer and an emotional mess; my thought process was very undisciplined, to say the least. I took everything to heart and often created emotional drama for myself, all by giving ground to the enemy in my mind.

Romans 8:6 (NLT) says, ***"Letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control our mind leads to life and peace."*** We all battle with our thoughts and, at times, our desires. It is how we proceed that either frees us from entanglement or sets a trap for us to fall. Scripture gives us many warnings of the dangers that can come from entertaining thoughts and ideas, allowing them to take hold in our hearts.

"For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, and slander. These are what defile a person." Matthew 15:19-20

"For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do." Galatians 5:17

There is always a battle going on for us to give way to sin. Philippians 4:6-8 gives us assurance that Christ will guard our minds and our hearts, ***"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."***

JoAnne passed away nearly twenty years ago, but her words are a constant reminder for me to look to God's Word first when dealing with difficult situations. Sin is always going to be a daily battle, but I have learned to stop inviting it in. The warnings are there in Scripture, but our Loving Father also gives us guidance in how to identify when we are being tested. Romans 12:2 says, ***"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."***

The process of learning the Word and allowing the Holy Spirit to work in my heart over the years has enabled me to discern and identify when my thoughts are not in alignment with His Word.

Martin Luther said, "You cannot keep birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair." You cannot keep the devil from suggesting thoughts, but you can choose not to dwell or act on them.

DON'T GOUGE OUT YOUR EYE

LUST, DEVOTION 3

Debbie Gabbara

One thing we see in Matthew chapter 5 is that Jesus did not shy away from tough subjects. The Pharisees spent a lot of time trying to find fault in His teachings and actions. I would imagine they were quite appalled by what He had to say when Jesus suggested to the crowds that they pluck out their eye or cut off their hand if they caused them to sin. Jesus says, ***"So if your eye - even your good eye - causes you to lust, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your hand - even your stronger hand - causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell"*** (Matthew 5:29-30 NLT).

Jesus did not really mean for us to dismember ourselves; He was using deliberate exaggerations to make a point. This is called hyperbole. We have used them too. Have you ever said something like, "I have a million things to do today," or "These shoes are killing me," or how about this one, "You could have knocked me over with a feather?" Those are all hyperboles.

Jesus was using extreme examples to try to help the crowds He was teaching and us to see the extreme costs that sin can have in our lives. We all have a desperate need for Jesus. Only He gives us victory over our emotions, actions, and the will of our mind. We have to be diligent to avoid sin. We have to make deliberate choices. It starts with choosing Jesus!

Romans 7:21-25 (NLT) says, ***"I have discovered this principle of life - that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. I love God's law with all my heart. But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord."***

Sinning is something that we do not want to do, but we all do it; because, as the apostle Paul said in Romans chapter 7, there is a war in our minds that makes us a slave to sin. Without Jesus, we are doomed to be thrown into Hell and separated from God forever. Do not let sin cause you to "lose" an eye, hand, or any other part of your body that led you into sin. Make a deliberate choice and look for the promises found in God's Word.

"So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world." James 4:7-8 (NLT)

WOULD YOU RATHER?

LUST, DEVOTION 4

Pastor Patrick Rowland

One of my family's favorite games to play while traveling on a trip is "Would You Rather?" The basis of the game is one person makes up two similar but different options and you have to pick one or the other. It could be something simple like, "Would you rather be stuck in traffic with no air conditioning or stuck on an airplane circling the runway and not able to land?" It could be something rather strange like, "Would you rather have your legs bend backward or your eyes on the side of your head?" Usually, neither option is ideal much like the "would you rather from Jesus" in Matthew 5:27-30.

He said, ***"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell."***

Would you rather give up your eye or spend eternity in Hell? They are both terrible options, but Jesus makes the point that sin (not just lust) will lead to death or separation from God. If you have to lose a body part to keep from sinning then it is a worthy sacrifice. I want to be clear here, Matthew and any person teaching this passage, would not advocate for self-inflicted blindness. However, removing yourself from the temptation of sin can change your eternity.

Jesus is speaking specifically to “lustful intent” with a person you are not married to. That could be a person you know or a person you even create in your mind, in either case, we should have blinders when it comes to “lustful intent.” It is important to be aware of these two people.

First, the person you know as it might be a co-worker, friend, neighbor, or someone you are vaguely associated with. No matter your connection, it would be a person you have a physical and or emotional attraction or admiration. That person is not your spouse if you are married, yet it is a person you find yourself wishing or planning ways to have more time with them. This is a desire that causes you to wish the relationship was more than a friendship and that it could be sexual. As a single person, one can have “lustful intent” for another person and begin to only desire a sexual relationship in reality or in fantasy with the person. As a single person, it is not the attraction that is wrong, it is the “lustful intent”.

Second, is a person you have created in your mind or someone you wish your spouse to be. If my spouse was just more attractive, affectionate, appealing, or paid more attention. After a period of time in a relationship, we might develop an expectation for our spouse to meet a personal need. This is the appeal of pornography for men and women as it is seeking a deeper connection with a fictional person. That person is not someone you know or can ever possibly know, yet you have a desire for them. The issue is not with your spouse, it is with you!

In one of my all-time favorite books, *Wild at Heart,* John Eldredge says, “What makes pornography so addictive is that more than anything else in a lost man’s life, it makes him feel like a man without ever requiring a thing of him. The less a guy feels like a real man in the presence of a real woman, the more vulnerable he is to porn.”

The appeal of pornography is to feel more like a man, but it is not real so the fulfillment is fake, shallow, and temporary. It never truly fulfills the person because the design by God is a relationship. That is a relationship between man and woman in marriage, but also a relationship between man (or woman) and Jesus. Pornography is a problem in our culture as it is destroying family relationships and spiritual relationships. If "lustful intent" is a problem for any person attempting to fulfill a desire to feel like a man then by all means find some blinders. Start with an accountability partner and accountability software for your computer.

"So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart." 2 Timothy 2:22

WORSHIP AND THE MIND

LUST, DEVOTION 5

Pastor David Wilson

"The first look is okay but the second is lust, so make sure that your first look is a long one," says a dad to his son as a woman walks by. That statement reveals something about that dad; he may believe impure thoughts are not sinning, as long as no physical actions are taken. Jesus teaches in Matthew 5:27-30 quite the opposite. The impure thoughts and the physical actions are not different. He starts with the reminder of the seventh commandment: ***"You shall not commit adultery"*** (Exodus 20:14).

We must understand that the commandments were rules God gave Moses in Sinai for the Israelites to know how to live a holy and perfect life before Him. Spoiler: no one can keep them. James 2:10 says, ***"For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it."*** In the failure of one, we earn the full weight of the Law's consequences. Jesus says the thoughts of the mind and intents of the heart have consequences too. Jesus Christ called us out of sin and washed us clean providing a new life with wisdom, guidance, and purpose.

Jesus presses on from recollection to illustration. Matthew 5:29-30 states how serious our impure and defiled mind is viewed by God and that we must deal with it immediately and harshly. Jesus illustrates that it would be better to sacrifice an important part of ourselves to save our whole being. We now have no excuses and are accountable to the knowledge given in these passages - the impure mind, though not physically acted upon, is still sin.

How can we guard our minds against sliding into unholy thoughts? What can we do when we recognize a failure in this area? We can stand firm on the truth of 1 John 1:9, ***"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*** Confess the impure thoughts and God will cleanse you and forgive you.

We can put on the helmet of salvation to guard our minds against impurity. Get your brain washed by the Word! In 2 Corinthians 10:5, Paul instructs us to ***"take every thought captive to obey Christ."*** Paul provides a precious gem to help protect our minds and remain pure. Measure every thought by God's Word, check whether or not it reflects a redeemed life. If it does not, then throw it away from your mind, never entertain it again; if it comes back, then throw it away again, and again, and again. To keep our body in subjection by obedience to the Word, we are expressing our faith in Jesus and I personally believe we are living in the sixth Beatitude - to be pure in heart. The pure heart and mind before the Lord honors Him and is worship.

I LOVE YOU, LORD

LUST, DEVOTION 6

Caleb Jones

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell." Matthew 5:27-30

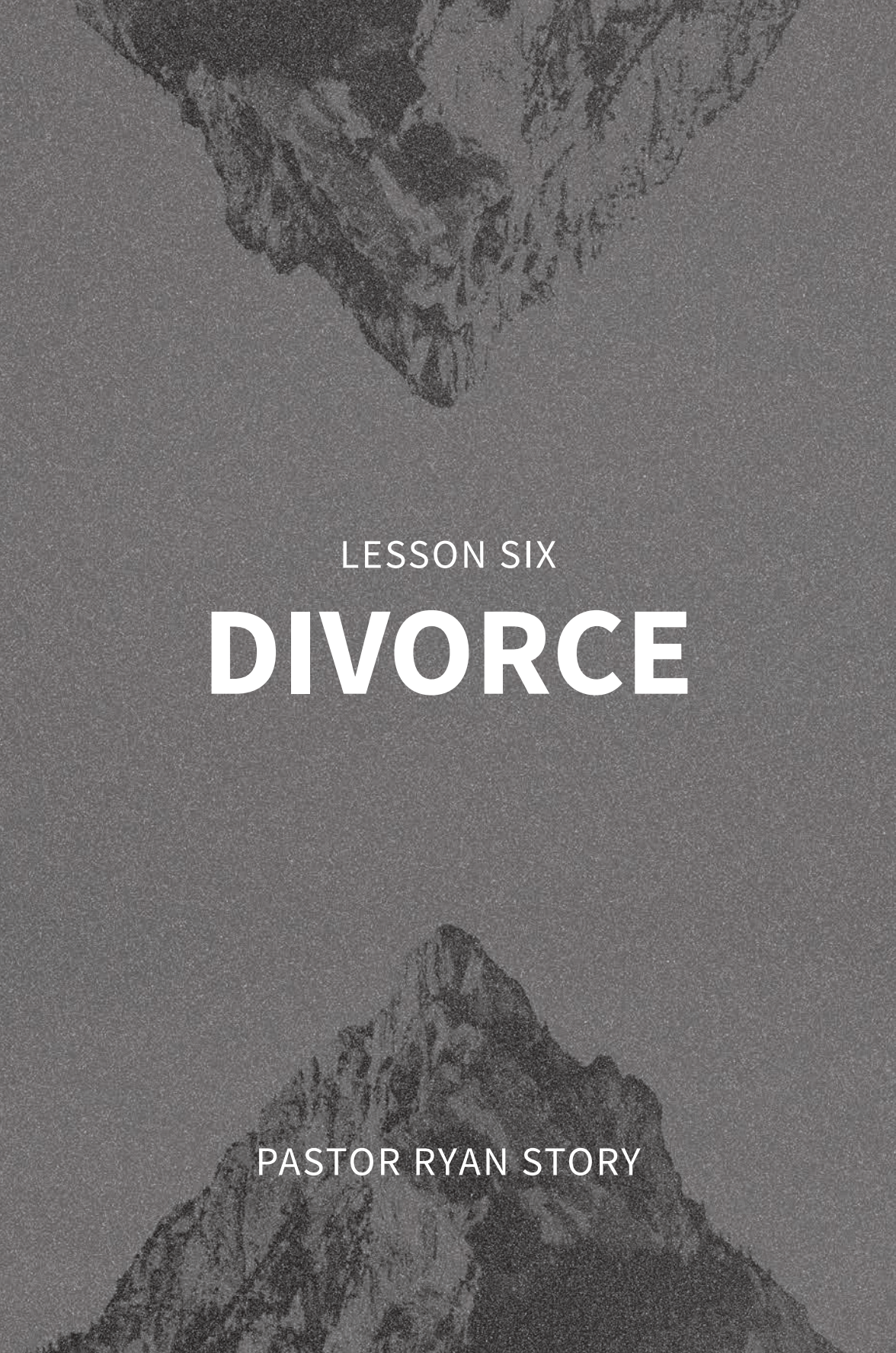
"You can look but you can't touch." I have probably heard this saying a thousand times in my life. We hear it mostly when parents are trying to get their kids not to break something in the store. Sadly, I think we have tried to apply this to our theology when it comes to adultery. However, if we look back to the text, we see that God tells us that even looking at someone with lustful intent is adultery. The same principle is true with hating someone. In 1 John 3:15, we read, ***"Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer."*** God is trying to teach us that He cares deeply about our hearts. In 1 Samuel 16:7, we are reminded, ***"Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."*** Countless times throughout Scripture, He tells us to purify and to guard our hearts.

Almost 20 years ago, I worked in a warehouse building manufactured homes. I remember there was a tool crib where they sent us to get extra tools that we needed. I will save you the details on what else was in this closet, but I hated going in there. I did everything I could

to avoid it. The times that I felt I had no choice, I would go in singing an old song in my head.

I love you Lord, and I lift my voice
To worship you, oh my soul rejoice
Take joy my king, in what you hear
May it be a sweet, sweet sound in your ears.

Now there is nothing special about this song, but I found it really hard to allow my eyes to lust while also telling God that I loved Him. The more time that we spend with Jesus, the less time we have to fill our hearts with sin. Hebrews 12:1-2 says, ***"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."***



LESSON SIX

DIVORCE

PASTOR RYAN STORY

There are hard topics in the Bible that most people do not want to discuss. Today is one of those lessons. The difficulty of this lesson is that I have no idea where anyone is at within the scope of the topic of divorce. Some may have had a divorce, some people have parents who were divorced (full disclosure, my parents had a nasty divorce), and some know friends or family who have gone through a divorce. Some people have gotten a divorce and never seen their ex again. Some have navigated through their difficulties and have been able to co-parent their children and possibly even remarried each other. There are people reading this who look at divorce as the ultimate of scarlet letter social sins, and others who may deem it as "not that bad depending on the situation."

1. Why is divorce such a difficult topic to discuss within the church?

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I am weirdly into data because data is black and white. Looking up divorce data while writing this lesson was fascinating and a bit of a bummer all at once. From what I can gather, there are two cultural phenomena happening. First, fewer people are getting divorced from 20 years ago. Secondly, fewer people are getting married. I am not the type of person to wish for the "good old years of family values" to return, because I believe euphoric recollection is a real thing. The family distinction has always been an issue since sin entered the world. Family dysfunction is alive and active in our society as well as inside the church.

2. Do you think divorce is more acceptable in our current society than 30 years ago? How about 50? How about 200 years?

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This was a hard lesson to write about. I do not feel I have the vernacular to write a lesson that can "divorce-proof" a marriage. There are books on this topic and I am not looking for anyone's Growth Community to share for hours upon hours. I can give insight. I can give Scripture.

3. What holds a marriage together?

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I read once, "you are a sinner married to another sinner" (Paul David Tripp). Often times we look for solutions on how to keep our marriage together, and we seldom go back to the fact that the Gospel supersedes and saturates every aspect of our life. When Jesus says, ***"What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate"*** (Mark 10:9), He is not just saying that so it could conclude weddings with a nice saying. The truth our Lord spoke 2000 years ago points us to our need for the Gospel to hold all our relationships together, but especially inside the marriage.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks gives two verses regarding divorce. Matthew 5:31-32 records, ***"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."***

4. Biblically, can a person get a divorce?

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I feel this can quickly become a checklist verse. A checklist verse is going to a verse in the Bible, pulling it out of context to allow your interpretation to prevail, and then defending your point of view by saying, "You will see what Jesus says here is wrong." I never want to come on strong and speak for the King of kings and Lord of lords, but if your take away from this verse was "if a person commits sexual immorality, divorce is permissible," I think you are leaving a lot of biblical truth out of your view of Scripture.

Fun study: Read the book of Hosea in light of adultery within a marriage relationship. Hosea and Gomer show that even in the case of adultery in marriage forgiveness can still reign and the marriage is reconciled. Weird; that is the same as the Gospel of Jesus. Enjoy your study.

Reading the Bible in context helps. I believe to unpack the truth Jesus is getting at here, we need to know what He taught before these verses on divorce and the ones after. Last week we learned about all things concerning lust and adultery.

5. What was your major takeaway from last week's Growth Community?

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At the core of adultery are pride, self, ego, and selfishness. Adultery reigns in a heart that puts yourself first. Since looking at a person with lust is adultery, then daydreaming, fantasizing, and flirting would most likely fall into the same sin. Jesus' teaching about lust is bringing us to the truth that just because there is no physical intimacy does not void that sin from ruling our hearts. The moment we start lusting after

pleasures that are sexual, monetary, or positional is the moment an adulterous heart begins to bring separation in all relationships.

6. How is lust the first step towards divorce?

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7. Inside a marriage, why is it so critical that both parties be mutually submitting to Jesus?

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8. Why would Jesus teach about lust before He spoke on divorce?

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Protecting your heart from lust may be step one to "divorce-proof" your marriage. I do think the topic after Jesus teaches on divorce is the truth we need to hold. Next week in Growth Community we will go more in-depth with this topic. The verse that comes after Jesus' teachings on divorce is about oaths.

Matthew 5:37 says, ***"Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No;' anything more than this comes from evil."***

If we truly believe in God's sovereignty and we believe that God has a plan, then we must echo Jesus' teaching and say, ***"What God has brought together let no man separate."*** Why in the world do we not hold to the oath we took to our spouse on our wedding day? When a person gets married they are saying "yes" to them and

a “yes” to God. Sadly, in Jesus’ time, people held about the same convictions as we do today in regards to divorce. Mishnah was the oral law of the Jews. This was not the Mosaic Law that God delivered to Moses. The Mishnah states that a man can divorce his wife if she literally burnt his food.

9. Why would Jesus teach about the importance of oaths in light of teaching about divorce?

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Divorce is a hard sin to talk about. There are journals, books, and seminars that are devoted to this topic. My hope today is less about us landing in whether or not divorce is okay. I would rather land on looking at Jesus’ teachings with fresh eyes. We need to understand that Jesus is teaching an entire lesson, not just two verses. Jesus is calling His followers to avoid lust in their hearts and to uphold their oaths and let their word be their word.

10. Why are those two teachings from Jesus the best way to “divorce-proof” your marriage?

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STONE HEART

DIVORCE, DEVOTION 1

Josh Thayer

"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." Matthew 5:31-32

You started at the altar, staring into each other's eyes with overwhelming feelings of love and excitement about this new adventure you are going to take together. A whole new life is about to begin after you say the words, "I do." Then you find yourself in an office with some people in suits and you are signing the divorce papers. What went wrong in the middle of this story?

Divorce can be a tricky situation. There are a lot of variables to dig through. Is he at fault or is she? For the sake of simplicity, I want to look at one variable that I believe is the same throughout all divorces and it starts with the heart. This will not be answering the question of whether divorce is right or wrong but will stumble upon how we get to that point where divorce is on the table.

As we know throughout Scripture, we can find multiple references to the heart and how it cannot be trusted. The heart is deceitful and nothing good can come from listening to your heart. Mark 7:21-22 says, ***"For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness."*** Jeremiah 17:9 adds, ***"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"***

I believe it is your heart that will lead you to this place. You look at other couples around you in real life and on social media and you are like, "Why can't I be happy like them?" You start thinking, "Well if I was with her, I know I would be happier." You might think, "If he was my husband, he would probably listen to me and make me feel loved." Every time we ask one of these questions it separates us from our spouse and our heart begins to change. It is not physical, but we start to feel numb emotionally until we almost feel nothing at all. The further away we get, the harder our heart becomes and the thought of divorce starts to look like the only possibility for happiness.

I am here to tell you that it is not the only possibility for your happiness. Those feelings you had for your spouse are still there. They have just been masked with the stone heart. They have been covered up by questioning what you already have. They have been covered up by real hurt and pain that could be in your marriage that has not been resolved.

Devotions cannot always give you a feel-good ending or the answer to all your problems, but I believe there is hope and only Jesus can help you through everything you are going through. He can make your stone heart soft again and show you what has been in front of you the whole time. It is obviously not easy, and it is not a three-step process, but it will be worth it in the end. Find your happiness in Jesus and let Him begin to chip away at your stone heart one day at a time. If you are really struggling, I would encourage you to reach out to a Pastor or a godly couple you can trust to walk with you during this difficult time.

Psalm 37:3-5 says, ***"Trust in the Lord, and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness. Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act."***

HOLD FAST

DIVORCE, DEVOTION 2

Jeannie Yates

"Red rover, red rover, send Jeannie right over!"

Do you remember playing that game in elementary school? Each team forms a line, holds hands, and faces the other team across the field. They take turns calling for someone to run over to try and break through their line by running as hard and as fast as they can through the clasped hands. If you break through the line you get to take a member from that team back over to your team. If you are unable to break through, you join that team's line. You had to make sure you were squeezing your teammate's hand as hard as you could to have a strong defense. Sounds fun, right?

As we continue through the Sermon on the Mount, we see Jesus challenge us to think, act, and live differently than the world around us. Matthew 5:31-32 says, ***"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."*** We are challenged here to think differently about marriage and divorce. It is almost like we hear Jesus saying, "I know you have heard that this is just a simple transaction, but I am telling you that it is much more serious than that!" Those who have experienced the pain of divorce can tell you that it is not as simple as just dissolving a contract - the ramifications are far more serious.

Before my husband and I were married, we made a commitment that the word "divorce" would not be in our vocabulary - never a threat and

never even used as a joke. You have probably heard at a wedding this phrase from the 1982 *Book of Common Prayer,* "Therefore is not by any to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly; but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God." I am pretty sure that most couples on their wedding day do not see divorce in their future. However, just like in the game Red Rover, the enemy can easily break through when we loosen our grip.

Back in the beginning, God shared His design for marriage in Genesis 2:24, ***"Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."*** Please notice the words ***"hold fast."*** Sins of immorality, unfaithfulness, bitterness, selfishness, anger, and yes, even divorce, can easily make their way into our lives when we neglect to hold on tight to our Savior.

"Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good." Romans 12:9 (NIV)

RAY OF HOPE

DIVORCE, DEVOTION 3

Adam Moore

"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." Mathew 5:31-32

There are fewer things in life that I have been as passionate about as the topic of divorce. It is amazing how God will use different circumstances to make and mold you. Two years after my wife and I were married, we found ourselves venturing down the all-too-common path of divorce. For the sake of time, I cannot get into all the details, but it is safe to say that as two professing Christians we nearly let the devil destroy us and the outcome of our lives would have been very different today. As we continued down the road to divorce, I remember feeling so broken! If only someone knew what I was going through that could offer a glimmer or a ray of hope. It seemed like nothing could ease the pain that my broken heart was going through, and my life was in shambles. I was a young father of a 10-month-old boy, owned my first home, married the woman of my dreams, and now it was all crashing down! Why? Why, was this happening to me, God? Chances are, if you are reading this, then it is likely that you have asked God this same question before, "Why?"

Most of the time we do not know or understand why we are going through the things that we are experiencing. I know at this very dark and trying juncture in my life, I could not tell you why my world was seemingly burning down. I think of Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:12, when he says, ***"For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.***

Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known."

We often go through things in this life that we may not find out the reasoning "why" until we get to Heaven. God has a plan for our lives, and we just need to trust Him. The last statistic I read said that 50% of all first marriages will end in divorce, and it is even higher on second and third marriages. The enemy is out to destroy the marriage and the home like never before. He knows that his time is short, and the marriage institution in and of itself, is a divine picture of the Gospel.

When it looked like my marriage was gone, and that all hope had been lost, God showed up! On the final day of our divorce proceedings, my wife and I looked at each other and walked out of the courtroom that day together never looking back! Two more children and 15 years later, God used my brokenness to jump-start *DivorceCare* at The River Church. Some of the most precious people I have ever met in my life entered through the doors of *DivorceCare*, and if it took God breaking me to make this happen, then I say, "Thank you, Jesus!"

If your marriage is struggling, then seek help immediately before it gets destroyed. If you are already divorced, then know that God's mercy is real and that He loves you no matter what! Your life has a purpose, and Jesus can fill any void.

LITTLE MOMENTS

DIVORCE, DEVOTION 4

Cathy Story

During this recent season, my husband and I have had the privilege of participating in a marriage Growth Community. We were grateful for the number of couples wanting and willing to set aside time in their weekly schedules to build, strengthen, and remold areas of their marriages. From couples preparing to enter into marriage, to couples with more than 30 years together, this group made a commitment not only to the group but to their spouse to make their marriage a priority. One of the most encouraging aspects of this Growth Community was seeing the desire couples had to focus on their marriages.

When looking at the topic of divorce, the dissolution of a marriage, sometimes people question, "How did it get to this point?" Others upon hearing the news of a divorce may ask, "What happened, they seemed so good together?" While still others will say, "Not a shock, we saw that coming." Each of these responses is saddening to think about, but what can we do to at least try to prevent the topic from even coming up?

Matthew 5:31 gives a slight insight into the topic of divorce, saying, ***"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'"***

These verses are interesting to look into because it would appear that, at this time in biblical history, people were taking this out of context and divorcing their spouses for any trivial reason. This does not sound too different from our society today! In our Growth Community we were using the book *Marriage: 6 Gospel Commitments Every Couple Needs to Make* by Paul David Tripp. Tripp talked about a

concept of “little moments,” or the fact that our marriages are often not made up of big moments, but rather the little ones. These little moments (our day-to-day or even moment-to-moment interactions) are more the fabric of our marriages than grandiose events. Tripp refers to how these moments, because they are little, are so often overlooked and undervalued in the context of marriage. We do not prioritize what we say, how we act, or how we treat our spouse. We let the little frustrations build up until they no longer are little. We allow the words “like” and “love” to interchange. Instead of looking at our spouse with, “I love my spouse, but may not always momentarily like them,” we switch to, “I like my spouse, but I just do not love them anymore.”

If your marriage has been in a rough spot, maybe you need to take some time to focus on your “little moments.” Look for ways to respond, talk to, act on, and think about your spouse in a positive way that may benefit you both. Talk with your spouse about the “little moments” in your marriage that might be causing tension or frustrations. Look for ways to add positive “little moments” into your days.

PURSUIT OF HOLINESS

DIVORCE, DEVOTION 5

Pastor Patrick Rowland

"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." Matthew 5:31-32

This is the second reference to adultery made by Jesus in six straight verses. The previous passage connected lust to the moral equivalent of adultery, and now Jesus makes the same connection to divorce. In Old Testament Law, divorce had its place and regulations as a consequence of sexual immorality.

Anyone that has been married for more than a day will confirm that marriage is hard. I have been married for 28 years and not all the moments have been "happily ever after." I will be the first to admit that I am responsible for a very high percentage of the not-so-happy moments. Marriage was given as a gift from God to share the deepest joys in life as well as the greatest sorrows. My marriage is far from perfect, but I would not trade our pursuit of holiness for all the happiness in the world.

In Genesis chapter 2, in the garden, God created man and woman in His own image and blessed marriage as holy. Author Gary Thomas in his book Sacred Marriage notes that marriage is not designed to make us happy, it is to make us holy. Happiness is the product of holiness and a couple's pursuit of a holy marriage.

The church has forever placed a value on the sanctity of marriage as a lifelong commitment. Engaged Christian couples are counseled and taught, biblically speaking, that divorce should not be an option unless there is sexual immorality. There are other immoralities that destroy the pursuit of holiness and no one person should be subjected to abuse of any kind. Abuse is not the design of marriage created by God. The purpose of this teaching and counseling is to raise the value of holiness, not strip one from happiness.

We need to be real; we no longer live in the garden and in the physical presence of God's holiness; therefore, our daily pursuit of holiness is combated by human temptation and sin. As sin makes its way into a person's life the pursuit of holiness is lost and its impact on marriage and family is devasting. Jesus' teaching does not conclude that one should not live in the absence of a pursuit of holiness. It is a reminder for all to make a commitment to pursuing holiness as individuals and as a couple, not just the "happily ever after" feeling.

LOVE AND RESPECT

DIVORCE, DEVOTION 6

Justin Dean

As we continue through Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, we come to a section where Jesus decides to address divorce. Matthew 5:31-32 says, ***"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."***

Did you know that every 42 seconds, there is one divorce in America? That equates to 86 divorces per hour, 2,046 divorces per day, 14,364 divorces per week, and 746,971 divorces per year. Unfortunately, divorce has become an incredibly common occurrence in our world today. Either we or someone we know has gone through a divorce in some way, either as the couple or as the child. One thing that we all know for certain, marriages were never intended to end this way. We see Jesus, while addressing the Pharisees as they question Him, giving the reasons for why marriage is such a sacred thing not to be destroyed.

Mark 10:6-9 (NIV) says, ***"But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."***

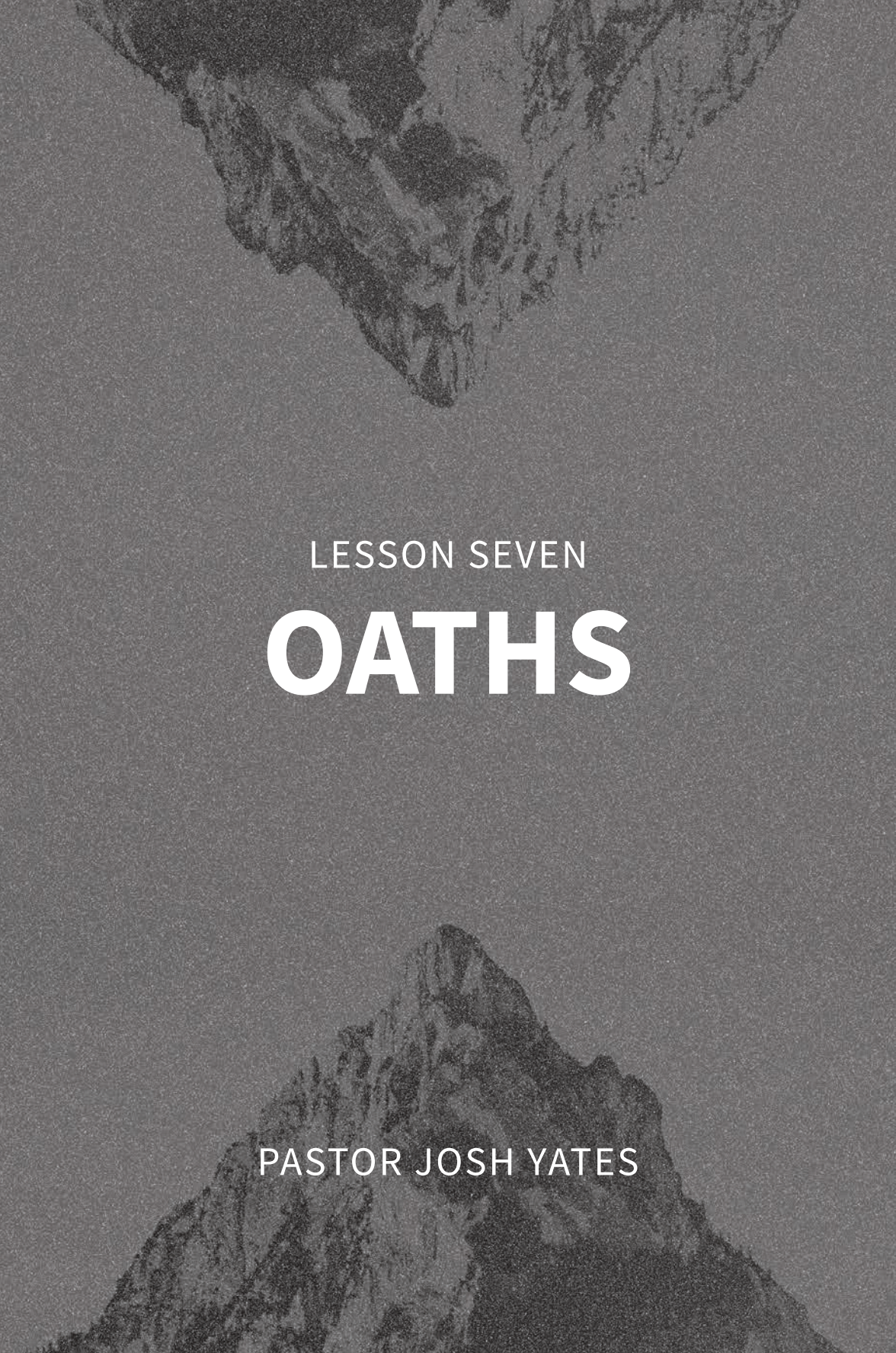
So, if marriage is something so pure and brought together by God, where do we begin to strengthen it? It starts with submission to Christ, and following His Word. We find littered throughout Scripture

the ways we should interact with others. This first and foremost has to do with our family. Showing our spouse, the Fruit of the Spirit is an essential piece to a healthy marriage. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control should all be reflected as we interact with our spouse just as much as with our neighbors. If we cannot live out these characteristics with those whom we claim to love, how can we hope to show them to others outside our family?

Paul also highlights two attitudes that we should seek to treat our spouse within Ephesians. Ephesians 5:33 says, ***"However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband."*** He mentions love and respect. These characteristics should define the interactions within our marriages. Notice, Paul did not say, "Husbands only love your wives if she respects your decisions," or "Wives respect your husbands only if they show love and affection towards you." He called us to love and respect regardless of the situation and despite how our spouse chooses to act. All fights, hurt, and anger within marriage are caused by a lack of love and respect. Many times, divorce is the result of many of these interactions building up to a breaking point. Instead, even in the heat of pain and frustration, we must remind ourselves to love, respect, and not give up on what God joined together.

As we walk through marriage, we must be willing to admit when we are at fault, forgive, and do so in a manner that reflects love and respect. In order to deal with the divorce problem seeking to creep into the church, we need to seek godly principles in our marriages.





LESSON SEVEN

OATHS

PASTOR JOSH YATES

If you have ever been in any relationship at all, you have been asked a question where you knew that if you told the truth, you just might find yourself in some hot water.

> "Do you like my cookies?"
> "What did you think of that presidential debate?"
> "Do these pants make me look fat?"
> (By the way, the answer to the last question is always an emphatic, "NO!")

In these situations, it is usually better to care for the heart of the person that is speaking to you rather than to rip into them with the truth of the situation.

Telling the truth is so important. Yet, if we are honest, we find ourselves in situations where we are tempted to tell something less than the truth.

1. When are some times where you have struggled in telling the truth? (Talk about both funny and serious moments or situations.)

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We are most tempted to "stretch the truth" when we have been caught doing something we know we should not have done. When we did not clean our room as a kid, when we took that piece of candy, or when we cheated on a test in order to get out of perceived consequences, we lie. We do not tell the truth.

I have told my girls that if they tell the truth, it will always be better than if they lie. If they have done something they should not have, there will be consequences, but if they lie to me, the consequences will be multiplied.

2. What are some consequences you have experienced when caught in a lie in your life?

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I remember a time in my childhood when I had done something that I should not have done and I was going to get a spanking. My parents used a belt and I had decided that I would be smarter than my parents and hide it. My mom came and asked me where it was and I laughed at her. You can imagine the consequence. UGH!

We come to the passage that we are studying today in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has gone through the foundation of the sermon in the Beatitudes and is now going through specifics of how a Jesus-follower lives. He has covered our influence in the world, anger, lust, and divorce. It is not a coincidence that He now tackles telling the truth.

Read Matthew 5:33-37.

Jesus talks about oaths in this part of His message. Oaths are not something that we are used to hearing about today. We do not really use that word anymore.

3. What is the oath that Jesus is talking about here? What would be the equivalent today?

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When I think of oaths, I think of government. The two sides of our government in America argue and fight over so many issues to try to

come to a conclusion and make laws that will strengthen our society. During that process, there are many meetings where promises are made. From the look of things on the outside, those promises are hardly ever kept. In fact, politics seem to have perfected the art of lying.

The Chaplain of the Kansas Senate prayed this prayer over the chamber many years ago:

> *Omniscient Father:*
> *Help us to know who is telling the truth.*
> *One side tells us one thing,*
> *and the other just the opposite.*
> *And if neither side is telling the truth,*
> *we would like to know that, too.*
> *And if each side is telling half the truth,*
> *give us the wisdom to put the right halves together.*
> *In Jesus' name, Amen.*

We live in days where the truth is hard to find. As I write this study, our world is in the midst of the COVID Omicron surge and truth is hard to determine. Are the numbers correct? What is really going on? No matter what decision anyone tries to make, it is seemingly based on half-truths.

4. How has a lack of truth around you or in you affected your life or decision-making?

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Jesus begins this part of His message speaking of the way oaths were encouraged in the Old Testament. However, what was being

encouraged in the Old Testament was not happening during the time that Jesus was speaking.

5. What kind of oaths or vows were encouraged in the Old Testament? (Take a look at Leviticus 19:12; Numbers 30:2; and Deuteronomy 23:21.)

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6. What was expected of the oath-giver in these passages? What was the consequence if that expectation was not met?

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Matthew 5:34-36 says, ***"Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black."***

7. Discuss what Jesus is saying here. The Old Testament encouraged oaths taken by the name of God and Jesus seems to be saying not to take oaths. Why the change?

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Do not continue reading before you answer the last question! (LOL)

Jesus was saying something different from what the rabbis of His day had been teaching.

The problem that Jesus was addressing is just as serious today as it was then. Rabbis had decided that if people made vows but did not use the name of the Lord or if another name was used, the vow did not have to be fulfilled completely. They had come up with a way to say you would do something but "cross your fingers behind your back" to get you out of that vow. In fact, Kent Hughes points out that the Mishna (Jewish rabbinical writings) devotes a whole section on oaths and where you can lie and when you cannot.

This sounds like us at times, huh? We can come up with so many reasons to not tell the truth, but those reasons are selfish. They are often for personal gain, saving face, or even covering up sin.

Jesus is saying that His followers do not need to swear by an oath in order to ensure that we are telling the truth. Jesus is not saying that we can never take an oath (in court or the like), but that His followers should be marked by the truth. His followers should be committed to telling the truth at all times.

8. Where do you struggle to tell the truth today?

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9. Is there anyone in your life you have lied to that you need to ask for forgiveness?

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10. How can you be more committed to the truth in your life as you follow Jesus?

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Do not let your fish get bigger.
Do not get better the older you get.
Speak the truth in everything you do and live the truth in everything you say.

A life of truth points to the One that you follow, Jesus. When you can be trusted and are known for speaking the truth, you have more opportunities to help others see Him!

"Let what you say be simply 'yes' or 'no.' Anything more than this comes from evil." Jesus in Matthew 5:37

THE MOON AND THE STARS

OATHS, DEVOTION 1

Mark Pittenger

In 1994 there was a country song released by John Michael Montgomery titled, *"I Swear."* Later, in the summer of that same year, it was also released as an R&B song by a group known as All-4-One. The lyrics were the same, just the genre of the music was different. The lyrics of the chorus start out:

And I swear by the moon and the stars in the skies,
I'll be there.
And I swear like the shadow that's by your side,
I'll be there

With the overall theme of the song, in both genres, being a man professing his love and faithfulness to the woman of his dreams, it may seem like an innocent and sweet song. I can remember serenading, which may be used loosely here, my wife with this song many times when we were younger. I embodied the writers, and singers, as I swore an oath to my wife every time the song was played.

As innocent and fun as this may seem, I had already made this oath to my wife on the day we were married. I recited the vows and made a promise. Therefore, it was now my job to show her, through actions, that I was going to follow through on that oath.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns of making oaths. In Matthew 5:33-37, Jesus says, ***"Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or***

by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No;' anything more than this comes from evil."

What Jesus is saying here is pretty to the point. We should not have to swear an oath to prove that we will follow through on our word. We often will add to a statement, "I swear to God" or "I swear on my mama's grave" after we agree to something to let the other person know that we are serious. We should not have to do this. Our actions should back our words and then our words will carry substance. In other words, if you say you are going to do something, do it. Mean what you say, and say what you mean. Do not leave any room for questioning when it comes to your word. To paraphrase what Jesus says, simply say "yes" or "no," and then follow through on your "yes," and stand firm on your "no."

On the flip side of this, I will often hear someone ask another person to "swear to God" or something similar. We should not be asking that person to swear that oath. We should take the person at their word. Then if they do not follow through on their word, we know that the next time, we need to simply stand behind our no.

Do you ever find yourself having to give extra assurance to people? Do you often hear others giving these assurances? I challenge you to follow through on your yes and stand firm in your no. You should not have to swear by the moon and the stars in the sky in order for people to take you at your word. Simply say "yes" or "no," and follow through.

"It is a trap to dedicate something rashly and only later to consider one's vows." Proverbs 20:25 (NIV)

HUMAN OATHS VS. GOD'S PROMISES

OATHS, DEVOTION 2

Sydney Kimball

In my experience, many of us pray the same way. What I mean by this is that we have a set structure as to how we talk to God. The Bible instructs us to always be in thanksgiving and I believe, for that very reason, many of us choose to start our prayers with that exact heart posture. Now, we may thank God for what He has done for us, what He has given us, or maybe, if you are anything like me, you thank Him for His character. I find myself constantly praising and commenting on His faithfulness to us. He fulfills His every promise. That is not a simple task or an easy feat. I am confident we can all think of a time in which we have broken a promise. As I am confident you have heard countless times, we as humans are not perfect. We do, however, serve a perfect God. Although I would love to be able to say that I have fulfilled my every promise and have followed through with all my prior commitments, I, just like you, cannot, because I fall short of the standard of perfection that God holds.

I would argue that God does not set us up for failure. I would hope you agree! I think that the instructions from God to us are to set us on a path to success. He guides us in a way that leads us to righteousness, not a life of lawlessness and sin. We are His people who are set apart and so He gives us clear commands as to how to live as people who are set apart from the world.

His instructions on oaths are very clear! Jesus says in His most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, ***"But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King"*** (Matthew 5:34-35). At first, I was

rather puzzled as to why God would instruct us to avoid taking oaths. Upon further examination; however, I feel I have uncovered why He may have led us in this way. Now, it is important to understand that an oath is not a simple promise like the one you dish out when trying to push off taking out the garbage at the present moment. An oath is defined as a solemn promise or a vow. Think of a wedding! The bride and groom stand before a room of witnesses to commit their lives to one another until death do them part. This is a perfect example of an oath. This is also an example of an oath or vow that is pleasing to the Lord, as the great designer of the marriage covenant.

It is important to note that the Lord sees our hearts. Our God wants us to avoid making false promises or commitments that do not reflect the intentions of our telling hearts. An oath is a sacred promise that is not to be taken lightly and the Lord is trying to protect us by telling us to avoid them. He sees our empty vows and they are displeasing. When going before the Lord to make a sacred promise we must check our hearts because, unlike Him, unfortunately, we are human and cannot fulfill our every promise.

I PROMISE

OATHS, DEVOTION 3

Mitchell Holmes

Start by reading Matthew 5:33-37.

Oaths are a funny thing. We often feel that when someone says that they swear to something, it means that it carries more weight. It makes sense, right? When someone says, "I will get this done for you by 3:00, I swear!" it seems to convey that they have a true intention to complete the task by that designated time. We feel as if their oath makes it weightier and more impactful than if they had left it out.

Today's passage reveals to us that swearing and making oaths to something should be done with great caution. This passage becomes a little bit clearer when we realize that it is in reference to the Pharisees of Jesus' time. The Pharisees of those days were using fancy rhetoric and large words to swear and make oaths that they had no intentions of fulfilling. They were fooling people with their promises and taking advantage of their status to confuse people.

What Jesus is doing in this passage is clarifying something that was causing confusion. Everyone knew that it was against the law of God to swear by His name. So, what people had taken to doing was swearing by any other name; they would swear by the land they were on, or on their own wellbeing. In our own lives, we have probably heard something akin to "I swear on my mother's life!" Jesus is correcting this behavior here and saying that swearing by these things is no better than swearing by the name of God. Everything that has ever existed solely exists because of God. Everything is His. By swearing on anything, you are swearing on God's name.

Jesus then goes on to say that your word should be as simple as the words you say. When you have to swear to something or make an oath just to get someone to believe you, it tells everyone that there is no weight behind your words, therefore you must make some promise to reassure people of the truthfulness of your language.

This does not mean that we are never allowed to make promises or swear to things. Jesus Himself does this in Matthew 26:63-64, ***"But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, 'I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.' Jesus said to him, 'You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.'"*** The High Priest in this passage places Jesus under oath and demands to know if He is in fact the Christ and Jesus swears it to be the truth. Making an oath, promising something, or swearing to something carries a lot of weight and Jesus is asking us to not abuse them.

There are oaths that are even glorifying to God. When you select a spouse to marry, when you put the ring on their finger, you are making an oath before God that you are committed to that person. That oath is a sacred promise, not to be taken lightly. It is glorifying to God because He is the One that designed it and made it into the perfect union.

I challenge you, in your everyday life, to pay attention to the vocabulary that you are using. Respect the sanctity of an oath and tread carefully before making a commitment of that caliber. Glorify God in the way that you speak and recognize that we have the ability to point to God in something as simple as our vocabulary.

TRUTHFUL

OATHS, DEVOTION 4

Josh Thayer

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

Sometimes I feel that with how busy our lives are today, it is very easy for us to make a promise to someone, or even ourselves, and not follow through with that promise. Maybe it is just me and I am the only one who is super busy and things fall through the cracks, but I feel like people can relate to what I am saying. Here in Matthew chapter 5, Jesus is basically saying let your yes be yes and your no be no. Yet, why is He saying this?

I do not think we need to complicate this. We can realize that Jesus is putting an emphasis on telling the truth. As human civilization, I think we can safely say people are breaking promises left and right, and the concept of what was once sacred is now just a casual thing. So finding someone you trust, as the years go on, is getting harder and harder. Jesus is telling us, His followers, to not use promises but that our word should be enough. Being a trustworthy person has a lot of benefits to it, especially when trust is an extremely important quality in building committed relationships. Think about your sphere of influence and how many of those people would you consider trustworthy? Are you known for your trustworthiness? Do not lie to yourself!

To me, trust plays a very important role in not only building committed relationships with friends and family, but it plays a vital role in sharing the Gospel. Mind-blowing, I know, but think about it. If you are known for telling lies or bending the truth, then how are you going to be able to achieve the one thing we are all called to do? How can someone know if you are telling the truth about Jesus if you do not tell the truth in your everyday life? This is the double standard Jesus was warning us about. We are all called to a higher purpose and everything we do in our lives needs to reflect that! So the next time you think of breaking a promise, ask yourself, "Will this hinder my ability to share the Gospel with someone and possibly change their life for eternity?"

"But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your 'yes' be yes and your 'no' be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation." James 5:12

OUT OF OUR CONTROL

OATHS, DEVOTION 5

Rich Sawicki

Today we are going to talk about taking oaths. When I hear this it sounds very formal to me, but it was a custom back in the day to give your word as a verbal contract. Some oaths you have heard or said yourself, might sound something like this:

- I swear to God
- I swear on my kids
- I swear on my grandmother's grave

When people say these things it is usually because they really want someone to believe them or they are afraid for some reason others will not believe them.

What does it mean to take an oath? According to *Webster's Dictionary*, the definition of an oath is a solemn promise, often invoking a divine witness, regarding one's future action or behavior.

Jesus taught us in Matthew 5:33 that we should not take oaths lightly. Jesus says, ***"Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No;' anything more than this comes from evil"*** (Matthew 5:33-37).

The reason Jesus warns us to avoid oaths is that we are human (sinners) and can easily break them without even meaning to. There are strong consequences when you do break them. When we break an oath or promise, it is just like lying.

We have all experienced the results of broken promises. Maybe you have had someone break a promise to you or maybe you have broken a promise to someone else. It may have been by accident or on purpose, but the results are basically the same. When other people know that you have broken an oath, a vow, or a promise, it makes them question you. You become untrustworthy. A broken promise is a lie. Satan is called the father of lies. We do not want him as our father.

We can make a promise, but that does not mean we will be able to keep it. Nothing is actually in our control. You cannot swear by God because you cannot control Him.

It is dangerous to promise to take our kids to see a movie on a specific day and time. Things can get out of our control. The car could break down, a family emergency could come up, or the power goes out at the theater. All things are completely out of our control. We would have to break our promise. Jesus was teaching us that words have consequences and we need to choose them wisely.

He knows that we were created in the image of God. God is holy. We are called to resemble and behave like children of God. This means we are to choose our own words wisely and behave in a holy manner that is pleasing to God the Father. Jesus was the Living Word that came to dwell among us. He knows the damage sin causes in our lives through broken relationships with people, and ultimately with God. When you break a promise you not only disappoint the person

you broke the promise to, but you have to deal with the shame you should feel from having sinned.

Jesus came to die on the cross so we would not have to live with guilt or shame anymore. He wants us to live in a way that we do not need to take an oath in order for people to believe us. The kids will still get to see the movie.

You could have simply said, “Yes, we will try to go see that movie.” You would have avoided having to break a promise and feeling like you let your kids down.

You know that they are going to ask daily about the movie until you take them, but this is a good opportunity to practice saying no. Saying no is sometimes harder than saying yes and that is where we tend to get ourselves in trouble.

“Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No;’ anything more than this comes from evil.” Matthew 5:37

TRANSFORMATIVE POWER

OATHS, DEVOTION 6

Ferdinand Sanders

I have wondered what it actually means when someone says things like, “I give you my word” or “I swear on my life?” Am I the only one whose radar goes off when people have to tack on some additional arbitrary credibility to their words? Growing up, my father climbed the sales ladder in the automotive industry and valued a solid answer (even if the answer was “I don’t know”) over a guess or a made-up answer. My brother and I were taught to be men of our word, and that you do not go back on something or someone after you shake hands. Contracts, oaths, and a gentleman’s agreement are all only as valid as the one who is to uphold them.

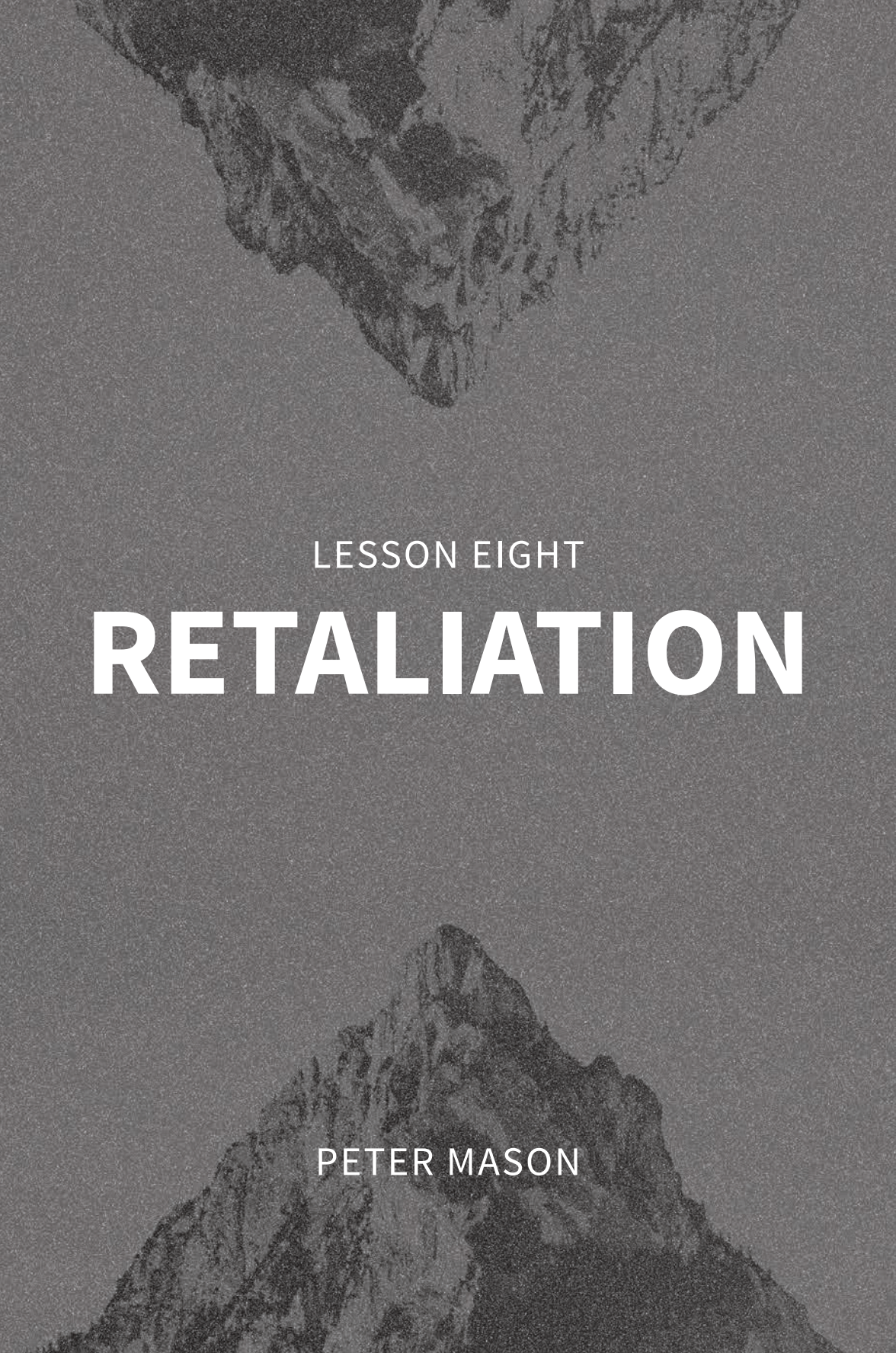
Almost in the same way that Jesus Himself is the “new covenant” (or means in which we receive salvation) which was different from the means found in the Old Testament. We see Jesus expound on this topic in Matthew 5:33-37. These verses in theory add, expound, or even substitute the teachings of the Old Testament Hebrew Law. We see from the Ten Commandments in Exodus chapter 20, that we are not to take the Lord’s name in vain. In Matthew, Jesus dives deeper and says that not only are we not to make an oath against God - but adds Heaven, Earth, Jerusalem, or even our own head. I absolutely love how Jesus puts it too, as He is basically saying that everything is God’s Kingdom or domain anyways - what value or collateral can we even put up against God; it is all already His!

If I can, I would like to present that there are a few ways that we can read the intent of this passage of Scripture and apply it in our lives. The first layer would be to read this passage quite literally and come to the conclusion that Christians should not swear to any oath

whatsoever. The basis for this is we can see literally three verses earlier in Matthew 5:30, ***"And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away."*** I would argue that we may be called deeper than simply a blind or brainless obedience. The second layer would be to read and conclude, "Oaths are okay as long as we do not swear on God and that we always live up to them." Again, while I would not say "wrong," I actually think we miss the point entirely if we do not let this passage infiltrate us at our core.

So then, what is the message here? Are we allowed to take oaths or swear on tangible things? Ultimately, we are being called to be credible and accountable men and women. ***"Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'"*** (verse 37). What good are someone's words if their actions say another? Who does not want to surround themselves with people that they can trust and count on, but are we holding ourselves to the same standards?

Though I do not mean to imply that somehow we, as people, add or give the message of the Gospel its transformative power, I cannot help but think, what message do we really convey when we represent, preach, and proclaim the Gospel if our lives are not evidence of transformation? I pray that not only will our "yes be yes" and "no be no," but that our lives would be an unwavering testimony of the transformative power of Jesus Christ.



LESSON EIGHT

RETALIATION

PETER MASON

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

When people first discover I lived in England for six years, one of the first questions is, "What is it like driving on the 'wrong' side of the road?" Driving "backward" is disorienting to say the least and it took me months of focused mental energy to rewire my instincts from driving on the "right" side of the road. Even after years in the UK, I still caught myself turning into the right-hand lane for a few quick milliseconds. Maybe you have had similar disorienting experiences traveling to where people do things "backward."

1. Have you ever had disorienting experiences while traveling abroad where things felt backward like driving on the "wrong" side of the road? What was that like?

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Jesus' teaching in His Sermon on the Mount would have similarly sounded "backward" to the way the world worked in first century Israel. However, Jesus was not suggesting His listeners travel to another part of the world where they do things "backward." He was teaching His listeners to live this "backward" way of life in their daily lives; to go in the opposite direction. Imagine not only driving on the left side of the road in England, but driving on the left side of the road in Michigan! What would happen? Well, a lot of collisions.

Jesus knew His Kingdom way of living would cause lots of collisions in the first century; you would be reviled, persecuted, and all kinds of evil would be uttered against you (Matthew 5:10-11). Jesus teaches us in Matthew 5:38-42 how to respond when we are shamed, insulted, reviled, and humiliated. It is when we collide with other people.

2. Why is it helpful to be aware that Jesus' teaching goes against the direction that our world wants to go?

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Matthew 5:38 says, ***"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'"***

Jesus' quote of Exodus 21:24 permitted limited retaliation in response to injustice. In a tribalistic culture, one wrong could evoke an even worse and spiteful response which would, in turn, evoke an even greater injustice and so on. One bad decision could lead to decades of tribal warfare. Even in the 21st century, we understand this cycle of retaliation where things spin out of control. A humiliating moment, five months later becomes a game of "getting even;" whether amongst our families, colleagues, or even church community.

Jesus has come to fulfill the Law's intention of establishing peace, harmony, and righteousness (Matthew 5:17). Jesus comes to deal with our hearts and thereby end these cycles of retaliation. His teaching sounds "backward" to our normal ways of asserting our justice when we are mistreated.

3. Have you ever tried to "get even" with someone who insulted, shamed, or dishonored you?

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4. Did it solve the problem or make it worse?

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5. How can trying to "get even" or simply allowing others to insult you perpetuate a cycle of retribution?

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Matthew 5:39-42 continues, ***"But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you."***

Jesus is often misunderstood in these verses as suggesting that we simply submit and accept unnecessary evil in our lives. On the contrary, N.T. Wright helpfully notes that "do not resist the evil one" in verse 39 can be translated as "do not resist by evil means." Jesus is not suggesting we simply do not resist evil; He is suggesting we resist evil by doing good. He is showing us how not to get caught up in the unending cycles of retaliation and instead end them. He gives short punchy illustrations of what this resistance looks like.

One disclaimer: these are not situations in which our lives are imperiled or deadly force is being used against us. In these situations, Jesus is talking about shame, dishonor, insult, and humiliation.

"If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." Being slapped across the face was an act of humiliation and belittlement. Being slapped on the right cheek means the perpetrator would have used his left hand which was considered the "dirty hand" used for taking care of "business" in the first century.

"If anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well." In the first century, the tunic was the outer garment and cloak the inner. They were expensive; think of the soldiers gambling for Jesus' garment. Even more, if you gave both your cloak and tunic, you would be standing humiliated and naked.

"If anyone forces you to go to one mile, go with him two miles." Roman soldiers, who were the occupying forces in the Jewish people's homeland, could make anyone carry all their gear like a pack mule at the drop of a hat.

Socially and physically degraded.

Stripped of one's dignity.

Inconvenienced and belittled in your own home.

In all these situations, our immediate instinct would be to retaliate with at least equal force in return. However, Jesus' teaching is the opposite. Jesus is forbidding us from entering into the cycle of counter-strike, but He is also forbidding us from doing nothing.

On an average day, most of us do not get slapped across the face or asked to haul a soldier's gear a mile down the road, or have the clothes on our backs demanded from us. However, there are plenty of circumstances and contexts where we do experience shame, insult, humiliation, and dishonor.

6. Where do we tend to encounter some of those experiences?

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7. Can you think of any examples of this happening in your own life?

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Notice:

- Jesus is not teaching us to passively "take it," scowling as we are beaten to a pulp.
- Jesus is not teaching us to begrudgingly walk alongside a Roman soldier as we are engulfed in anger.
- Jesus is not teaching us to reluctantly accept when someone takes our cloak.

There is nothing redemptive about any of that. It simply allows the perpetrator to continue.

Jesus instead teaches us to actively respond in a surprisingly redemptive way:

- We not only do not hit back; we offer the other cheek.
- We not only allow our tunic to be taken; we give our cloak as well.
- We not only walk the one mile; we keep going for another mile.

As Peter Leithart describes, “Instead of a series of slaps and return slaps, there are at most two slaps, both on the cheeks of the disciple, and then it’s over. Instead of a cycle of vengeance and retribution, it’s all over after two miles, after the disciple strips down to nothing. There is no more to be done.”

Following Jesus’ teaching also subtly restores the dignity of the person under assault. Instead of being a victim, the disciple takes initiative into his own hands (he offers his cheek, he removes his undershirt, etc.) The slapper wants to treat the slappee as a victim. However, when he turns and offers his other cheek, the slapper is suddenly put on the spot. He is forced to decide whether to slap again. The disciple has wrestled initiative out of his hands. The cycle has been broken.

A picture of Jesus’ teaching was displayed early one morning on Martin Luther King Jr.’s front yard where the night before rioters had burned crosses. News reporters were crowding waiting for Dr. King to open the front door and see his response. Eventually, the door opened and Dr. King came out, picked up the blackened and charred cross, and proceeded to lead the reporters in a time of prayer for those who that night had sought his own downfall and end. It was a moment of surprise that caught all off guard and arrested the cycles of evil. Neither passively shrinking back in fear, nor retaliating with anger. He prayed for those who persecuted him. It was a small glimpse of the redemptive Kingdom of God.

Perhaps what allowed Dr. King to respond like that is because he knew the man who lived entirely in the Kingdom of God. A man who refused to “get even” with His enemies, but instead prayed for them. A man who was Himself was struck and slapped (Matthew 26:27), who walked alongside roman soldiers who forced Him to carry a heavy weight. A man whose garments (Matthew 27:35) were taken from

Him and hung naked and humiliated upon a cross. The man Jesus Christ who died for his enemies: Dr. King, you, and me. While we certainly find ourselves in the shoes of the victims in these stories, we certainly are first the perpetrators. The Good News is that there is One who has already offered His other cheek, and His very life so that we might be saved.

8. Is Jesus teaching us to simply be a doormat for someone's anger, frustration, or evil intent?

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9. What makes Jesus' teaching and tactics to be shamed or humiliated redemptive?

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10. How does Jesus' teaching end the cycle of retribution?

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11. What gives us the strength and courage to actively seek to end these cycles of humiliation, shame, and insult?

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RETALIATORY AGRESSION

RETALIATION, DEVOTION 1

Joe Wilson

"Ye have heard that it hath been said, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away." Matthew 5:38-42 (KJV)

Retaliation by definition means, "to return like for like" or "to repay in kind." I must admit that I have struggled with this as a common response to adversity for much of my life. I learned from a young age to not show weakness and can remember my Dad telling me, "You better not start the fight," which is good advice, right? However, it was then immediately followed with, "But, you better finish it." As I became an adult, I continued with the same "Modus Operandi." Thus my anger grew and grew, along with my aggressive response to situations where I thought someone was attacking me or someone I cared about. It was not until I had gotten out of the military and became extremely prone to aggressive anger that, in fact, I realized that I was not helping anyone, but in actuality scaring them.

My response to adversity as stated above is in direct contradiction to how Jesus teaches us. Matthew 5:39 (KJV) states, ***"But whosoever shall smite [strike] thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also."*** Man's natural reaction would be to strike back (or at least mine would), but Jesus is calling us to take the higher road. Romans 12:21 (KJV) tells us, ***"Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil***

with good." Jesus provides us with the ultimate example of this type of response to adversity which far outweighs any adversity I have faced in my life.

I believe my aggressive retaliation is actually an issue of pride and not trusting God! Scripture tells us in Romans 12:19 (KJV), ***"Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord."*** God has me; "He's got my six!" If I feel the need to retaliate with aggression, what am I actually saying? I am saying that I am stronger and more equipped than God to handle whatever adversity is in front of me. How foolish am I?

"What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?" Romans 8:31 (KJV)

FAIRNESS

RETALIATION, DEVOTION 2

Gary Wright

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

When my children were little, their favorite movie was *"The Lion King"* and we watched it dozens of times. The villain in the movie is a lion named Scar. Scar thinks that he has been done wrong and that he should be the king instead of another lion named Mufasa. At one point in the movie, Scar catches a field mouse that he intends to eat and says to the mouse, "Life's not fair, is it?" Later in the movie, Scar retaliates and by force, takes over as king by killing Mufasa. We view Scar as the bad guy, but in reality, we are a lot like him. When someone wrongs us, we naturally want to retaliate and take matters into our own hands and make things right.

In Matthew 5:38-42, Jesus is teaching us something radically different than how we want to naturally react. He is teaching us that as believers, we should retaliate with love and forgiveness instead of stooping to the offender's level. When we become followers of Jesus, He changes our lives. It is no longer about getting even or about things being fair. It is about showing others the love that Jesus has shown us, even to the people that have personally done us wrong. Jesus says in Matthew 5:16 that you should ***"let your light***

shine before others." By showing love and forgiveness instead of retaliation, we are definitely letting our light shine before others. Others will see the difference in our lives, and it then gives us the opportunity to share the Gospel with them.

Before I was a follower of Jesus, if I did not retaliate and try to get even when someone had done me wrong, I considered myself weak; but as a believer, I realized it takes much more strength to respond with love and forgiveness. This kind of strength only comes from Jesus! If this is something you struggle with, pray and ask Jesus for His strength to help you to love and forgive instead of taking matters into your own hands.

Scar from *"The Lion King"* says, "Life's not fair, is it?" I do not know about you, but I am glad that life is not always fair. I am glad that Jesus was not fair with me, but gave me love and forgiveness instead of the fairness I deserved.

CONSEQUENCES

RETALIATION, DEVOTION 3

Jeremy Smith

In psychology, they teach about consequences. I always thought of a consequence as a negative or a punishment to replace my own actions. In reality, the consequence can be a negative or positive reaction. Similarly, retaliation has the same attribute. Jesus lays out in Matthew 5:38, ***"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'"*** He says we all know of an ***"eye for an eye"*** and yes that may be what our initial reaction is. He then hits us with this idea of what if you tried this instead.

Being a parent with multiple kids close in age, I realize that naturally, they like to get mad at one another. For a season, I would offer to let them go outside and they could fight it out. It was similar to the eye for an eye method. They never took the offer, but in turn, we would use it as a teaching moment to explain to them the Golden Rule. Luke 6:31 explains, ***"And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them."*** It is something we all need reminding of from time to time. We are going to have disagreements and potentially hurt others. Maybe we need to step back from the situation or find something else to do for a few moments until that initial reaction dies down. I cannot speak for everyone, but I highly doubt our initial reaction of burning someone else's world down is going to last. In turn, would it not be easier on everyone if we learned to get along here before we are all together in eternity? I have not read anywhere in the Bible that in Heaven we are only going to interact with those who we want to, like we do here on Earth.

Jesus came and died for us so we could all be given the opportunity to live with Him forever. For the most part, He never asks much from

us. He does, however, give us some great advice on how we can live amongst all people and be civil, yet still be able to stand out and reach others.

LEGION OF ANGELS

RETALIATION, DEVOTION 4

Adam Moore

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you." Mathew 5:38-42

Retaliation is an activity typically done to get even, or oftentimes one up an attack from somebody else. We see this in sports, politics, personal relationships, and sadly, governing bodies. It is a human action that is so easy to succumb to within our sinful flesh, yet Jesus commands us not to.

Throughout Scripture, you will find that we are reminded that vengeance belongs to the Lord (Romans 12:9).

In these passages, Jesus is delivering the Sermon on the Mount and reminds His audience of their law and how they are familiar with the notion of an ***"eye for an eye."*** The law seems fairly measured and was not stated that if someone takes your eye to respond by taking both of their eyes and their legs. Jesus is preaching to His audience and states that if someone strikes you on your right cheek to respond to them by turning your left cheek also. It takes a great deal of humility and self-discipline to respond to a situation like this. Jesus later puts His own words into action as He heads to the cross and men strike Him, and spit on Him. Can you imagine the leader

of any country in the world today standing by and letting an angry crowd strike and spit on them while having a fully prepared army standing by watching? Of course not, and yet the King of kings had a legion of angels at His command that could have come and wiped out humanity.

We often get caught in the self-serving act of retaliation while dealing with human emotion. For a good portion of my life, I participated in martial arts. I recall one time at a tournament that my opponent threw a roundhouse kick that struck the side of my head. I would love to say that I recalled the words of Jesus at that moment and turned to my opponent the other cheek as well (figuratively speaking), but I was angry and what unfolded next ended up in me being disqualified.

Jesus commands that we turn the other cheek and that if we are under obligation to go one mile then make it two. His desire is for us to go over and above the expectations of our fellow man and to set the example as Christ's followers. Do you remember the centurion at the cross? He witnessed all of Jesus' humility and suffering and concluded, "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:54). May we desire to be more like Jesus so that when our enemies want to see us crucified, the centurions in our life will look at us and recognize that we are the "Children of God."

GOD'S GRACE AND GENEROSITY

RETALIATION, DEVOTION 5

Keaton Washburn

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you." Mathew 5:38-42

I had the privilege of attending college in downtown Chicago. If you have been there, you know that it is quite the place. Chicago is the third-largest city in America by population and it feels like it. One of the first things that stuck out to me was the beggars on the corners. Growing up in metro Detroit, I would see people asking for money and food every now and then - usually when I went to downtown Detroit for a game. However, living in Chicago for four years meant I encountered people asking for money almost every day.

This new reality led to an internal conflict each time someone asked me for money or food. I repeatedly wondered:

"Should I give this person money?"
"What are they going to use it for?"
"What did they do to be in this position of need?"
"How much money have other people given them already today?"

Then there was one question I could not shake, "What would Jesus do in this situation?" This question literally kept me up at night. Scriptures about generosity and being a good steward repeatedly ran through my mind.

There was one specific instance where I was at the gas station and a man came up to me asking for help with some gas. Out of reaction, I apologized and let him know that I was not going to help him. Immediately, John's words in 1 John flooded my mind, ***"But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth"*** (1 John 3:17-18). I went back and forth about what to do and by the time I decided to help him he was gone. I had the ability to help him, I could spare $10 but for whatever reason, my pride held me back.

As we continue in Matthew chapter 5, Jesus' words are very simple and do not need much explanation. He says, ***"Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you"*** (Matthew 5:42). What stops you from helping the person in need? As followers of Christ, we are to be known for our generosity. Are you generous? What role does your pride play in your actions and attitudes towards someone in need?

In the way that only God can make happen, two years after this initial interaction with someone asking for money at the gas station, I had a very similar situation. While pumping gas again, a man asked for gas money. At that moment, these same verses flashed through my mind. I knew what God was calling me to do. I helped the gentleman out with $10 of gas and let him know that God sees Him and cares about him. It was not a whole lot and who knows where he was going, but I knew what I had to do to be obedient to Christ. I am so thankful for that and many other times where God's grace has given me another shot to be obedient to Him.

UNWRITTEN RULES

RETALIATION, DEVOTION 6

Philip Piasecki

Baseball is one of my favorite sports. There is just something special about getting down to the ballpark on a warm spring day to watch a game. One of the interesting things about baseball is the "unwritten rules" of the game. There are all these things that are not actually rules but are expectations for teams and players to follow. One common "rule" is how you are supposed to act after hitting a home run. You are expected to put your head down and run the bases. However, in today's game, the players want to have some fun and celebrate their amazing feats more and more. What better time to have some fun than after hitting a 400-foot bomb into the stands, right? Unfortunately, many pitchers disagree with this approach, and most of the time it leads to retaliation. Most likely the next time that batter comes up to hit, he is going to get hit by a 99 mph fastball. This is then going to lead to the other team retaliating and hitting one of their batters, which then sometimes leads to the other team retaliating and running out onto the field to fight. It seems like a never-ending cycle of retaliation.

We laugh at this, but sometimes in our life, we fall into this exact same cycle. Matthew chapter 5 has some powerful things to teach us on the subject of retaliation.

Matthew 5:38-42 says, ***"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the***

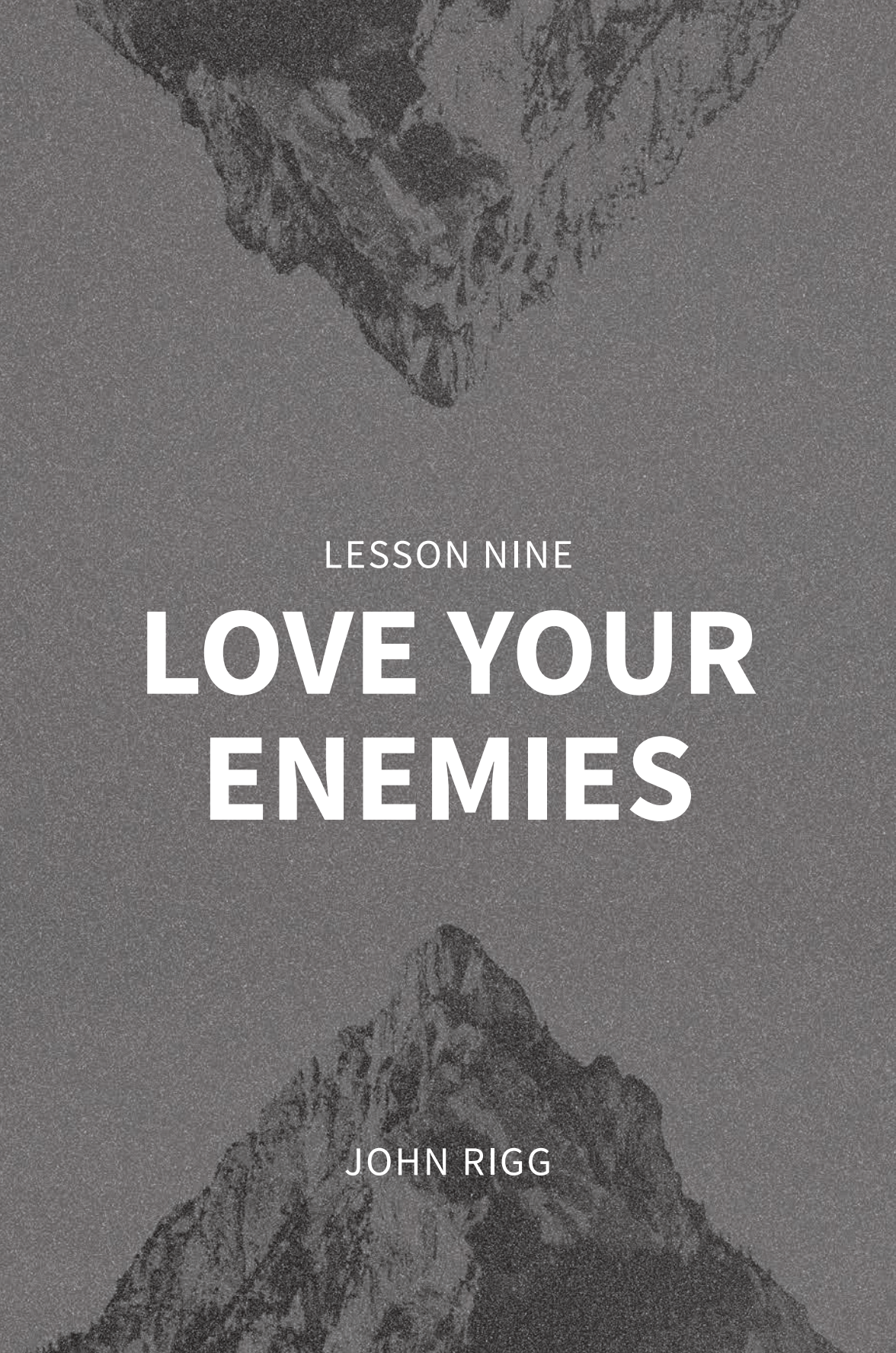
one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you."

It seems like even back in the Bible times there was a message from the world to "get even." They take an eye, you take an eye and call it good. I can see two guys right now both missing an eye shaking hands and calling it even. We know that is not really ever how a situation resolves itself. Normally it continues to escalate until someone decides to be the bigger person, forgive, and let it go. That can be so difficult for us in that situation. It is not easy to let ourselves be wronged and forgive and move on.

The crazy thing is, this Scripture actually tells us to go one step further. If we get slapped, we are not commanded to just forgive and move on; we are commanded to turn our other cheek and let them hit us again. Now we are talking about something radical. Now we are talking about something countercultural. When someone hurts you, are you willing to still pray for that person? When someone hates you, are you willing to praise that person? Personally, it is easy for me to forgive someone and forget about that person. I can easily move on and not think about that person anymore. It is not easy for me to constantly be in prayer for that person. It would be tough for me to help that person out when they were in their time of need. However, that is what this Scripture is calling us to do.

We know the Lord is in control. We know those that sin and do evil will have their judgment from the Lord. We are called to retaliate with even more kindness. What do we do to the Lord every day? We sin against Him daily, yet He turns the other cheek. It is our call as believers to show others the incredible love and forgiveness of Christ that He has so generously given to us. We have to be willing to give that as well when we are faced with these situations. Possibly

by showing this kindness, we will see those around us come to know and understand the incredible love of Christ.



LESSON NINE

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

JOHN RIGG

1. Have you ever had to reevaluate something that you believed to be true for a long time?

_____

_____

_____

Let me give you a couple of examples of beliefs I once had, but now know differently.

I used to believe that cracking your knuckles will one day lead to arthritis. However, after years of not cracking my knuckles and scolding those who did, I found out that although cracking your knuckles is extremely annoying and distracting to those around you, this displacement of "synovial fluid" from in between your joints does not lead to arthritis as is often claimed.

How about this? "Coffee stunts your growth." Although there are probably some good reasons you do not want your young children drinking large amounts of caffeinated anything, there is no scientific evidence that coffee slows down the growth process. Even though I did not start drinking coffee until an adult, I am relieved that my vertically challenged life is not inhibited by my love for coffee.

2. Write down something that you once believed to be true and now are persuaded to believe differently.

_____

_____

_____

As you have probably already noticed in our study of Matthew chapter 5, Jesus opens every major section by challenging His hearers and us, to believe differently than what we have previously been taught. This next section is no different.

Matthew 5:43 says, ***"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'"***

In Jesus' day, the Jews were instructed by the Pharisees and other religious leaders, to live and act according to the Law of Moses. It is probable that the ***"you have heard that is was said"*** portion of verse 43, was referring to what the Pharisees had been teaching in the synagogue.

3. So according to verse 43, what had the Pharisees been saying?

_____

_____

_____

Although we cannot be certain, they were probably teaching from Leviticus 19:18 which says, ***"You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord."***

4. What portion of the Law were the Pharisees teaching properly? Which part were they implying was okay to do?

_____

_____

_____

Nowhere in Scripture do we read of God giving His people the liberty to hate their enemies. In fact, this is the very thing Jesus is teaching against.

Matthew 5:44–45 adds, ***"But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 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."***

It is a great misrepresentation of the character of God when His "sons and daughters" act contrary to who He is. When Jesus says, ***"But I say to you,"*** He is helping everyone reevaluate their current belief that it is ok to hate their enemies and replace their response with love and prayer. This is the true character of God.

5. What does acting towards our enemies in love do for them? For us?

_____

_____

_____

6. How does praying for our enemies benefit them? What does it do for us?

_____

_____

_____

It is easy for us to understand Jesus' teaching here; however, it is a much more difficult task to execute. Adopting God's temperament towards our enemies is no doubt a reflection of our relationship with Him and our willingness to trust Him in our responses to those we consider our enemies.

Although God's command to love our enemies should be sufficient for us, He is kind enough to remind us of how He responds to evil and unjust people through His creation each day (Matthew 5:45).

Notice, God's character is on display through His actions towards all people, not just the good or those who choose to love Him. Jesus reminds us that God causes the sun to shine on the evil and the good. He also sends rain on the just and unjust. God has enemies, the evil and unjust. Yet He loves them.

7. Do you consider yourself to be a friend or enemy of God?

_____

_____

_____

Read Colossians 1:1-22.

8. Have you ever been an enemy of God?

_____

_____

_____

9. Knowing that you were once God's enemy through disobedience, does God's response of love towards you when you were His enemy change how you should respond to your enemies?

_____

_____

_____

At the beginning of this lesson, I asked the question, "Have you ever had to reevaluate something that you believed to be true for a long time?"

Maybe you have held on to the belief for a long time that it is okay to hate your enemies, retaliate, and take vengeance into your own hands. My personal experience in dealing with my enemies is this - at the end of the day, I still have enemies when I respond with hate and vengeance.

We can see through the Scriptures that God is moving us to something greater - loving our enemies with the goal of reconciliation. I know what you are probably thinking, "There is no way that I will ever be friends with _____. The past has produced

too much pain and too much suffering. Healing this relationship would be too difficult, if not impossible!"

Jesus never mentions "easy" in His teaching. In fact, His challenge is to avoid the easy. Matthew 5:46–47 says, ***"For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?"***

There is no reward in loving those that already love you or those that think and act the way you do. Jesus states that even those that do not know God or have a relationship with Him love in that way. The reward spoken of here is reconciliation, transforming an enemy into a friend. This can only be done through a relationship with God and trusting His ability to reconcile hearts to Himself. God's standard is always Himself. As sons and daughters, we always look to our Heavenly Father on how we should act and think.

Matthew 5:48 continues, ***"You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."***

Take a moment and think about how you are currently responding to an enemy you may have. It is someone who has hurt you or someone who does not think the way you do.

10. Write down how you are currently acting. Be truthful.

_____

_____

_____

11. Now write down, as a child of God, what God is saying to you and how you should respond going forward.

_____

_____

_____

Acting in love towards an enemy is rarely easy, yet we must respond with love if we are ever to reap the reward of reconciliation. Notice that our Lord gives no guarantee on how our enemies will respond to love. He just asks us to trust Him and act according to His example.

Pray for His direction.
Pray for His power.
Pray for reconciliation.

"If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." Romans 12:18

THE ULTIMATE EXAMPLE

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES, DEVOTION 1

Mitchell Holmes

The concept of enemies is such an interesting one in our culture; I am hard-pressed to come up with someone that I truly, vehemently despise to the point that I would classify them as my enemy. The term "enemy," to me, seems like something that might refer to your opponent in a war or large conflict of some kind. This is the type of person that the mere sight of them makes your blood boil and the desire to sharpen your sword intensifies. Maybe there is someone like that for you, but for me, I have been blessed to not have such a person in my life.

For me, enemies are people that annoy me like crazy. My biggest pet peeve is when people do not know how to drive their car. I am a loving person but I tell you what, when someone cuts me off and then proceeds to honk at me or make rude gestures, you will quickly see a new side of me. In those moments of raw emotion, I definitely find myself looking at that person as an enemy and all I can think about is how much I would love to give them a piece of my mind. As I pondered these types of interactions with "enemies" that we have on a daily basis, I came to the realization that these types of people are not truly my enemies; they are not people that desire to see me hurt or killed, they do not bear any ill will to me personally. Perhaps they just having a rough day, or more likely, I am extra irritable that day. As that understanding dawned on me, the words of today's devotional hit me that much closer to home.

In Matthew 5:43-48, Jesus says, ***"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,***

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. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." These verses of Scripture were so convicting to me. The fact that Jesus calls us to perfection is staggering. Of course, this is impossible but what Jesus is saying here is that by striving for perfection, we are a better example of Christ and a better image of the character of God. Jesus says that even with those people that we cannot stand, our Lord in Heaven still allows them to wake up to a sunrise each new day. There is not a single person that is not a lost cause and we have to be an example to them to equip ourselves to lead them to Jesus.

How do we accomplish this? How do we set an example? The passage tells us at the end that we are to be different; we are expected to love even those that hate us and greet those that are strangers to us. What Jesus is saying here is that we need to separate ourselves from non-believers by acting as Jesus would act. Even those who do not follow Christ are pleasant to their friends and welcoming to their loved ones. As Christians, we should be welcoming and loving to all people, even those that annoy, frustrate, and perhaps even hate us. Jesus, in His dying moments on the cross, lived out this command. In Luke 23:34, we read, ***"And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' And they cast lots to divide his garments."*** If Jesus, out of love for His enemies, can forgive the very people that were killing Him, certainly we can show love to the people in our lives that cause us strife. I know that the person who hurt you feels unforgivable at times, but that person needs a Savior just like you once did. Maybe the thing that finally softens their heart

and allows them to hear the Word is your kindness and love despite how they have treated you. Consider that today as you pray and as you spend time with the Lord.

SPEAKING WELL OF OTHERS

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES, DEVOTION 2

Pastor Chuck Lindsey

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father 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." Matthew 5:43-45 NKJV

Man, I love people who love me. It is so easy. It is so natural. It feels effortless to respond lovingly to the love, kindness, and affection someone shows to me. This, however, is not the way it goes for those that hate me, those that lie about me, or those that want harm to come to me or my family. In this little section of Jesus' sermon, we are told (in the simplest of terms) to love people who cannot stand us. It is a shocking passage that goes against every natural "way" in us.

Jesus begins by telling us to "bless" those who "curse" us. In the Greek language, it is a play on words. Let me explain. The word "bless" (Greek - Eulogeo) means to "speak well of" and the word "curse" (Greek - Kataraomai) means to "speak evil of." So the command from our Savior is to "be speaking well of those who are speaking evil of you." Say nice things about those who are not saying nice things about you. Notice that it is not just, "Don't malign those who are maligning you." It is going further than that. It is, "Say good things about those who are cursing you."

Do you know what I want to do in this situation? I want to defend myself. I want to defame the other person. I want to set the record straight. Like a tennis match, I want to return the serve with as much power as I can. I want to publicly and privately malign the person that is cursing me. I am told, by my Savior, never to do it. Man, this is tough!

It does not get any easier as He goes on to tell us to not just say nice things but also to "do good" (Greek - Kalos means to treat well) to those who "are not treating you well." Please notice that all of these are active commands. That means we are to be actively doing what is good to those who are actively mistreating us (i.e. cursing us and hating us). So again, this is not just forgetting about that person and moving on. It is actively doing good to those who are trying to do harm.

Again, what do I want to do in this situation? At the very least, I want to shut up my heart towards them, cut them out of my life, ignore them, and move on. I certainly do not want to do good things for them or to them. I certainly do not want to see good come to them. I want to see justice! Again, everything Jesus says here goes against the natural man.

He does not stop there. He goes impossibly further and tells us to do something that is so real, personal, private, and intimate. It is something that cannot be faked. It is something that is really hard to do when our hearts are hurt or angry. He tells us to take time to open our hearts and pray to Him for them. We are to be vulnerable and to pray for those who are spitefully (Greek - Epereazo means "to mistreat, insult, threaten") treating us this way.

He wants me to pray for them? Am I supposed to pray judgment on them? I can get behind that! No! That is not the tenor of the

command. His command to us has the backdrop of His own prayer from the cross, ***"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do"*** (Luke 23:34, NKJV). He tells us to follow His example and pray. Sure, pray for their eyes to be opened and things to stop, but also for their blessing and His work in their lives. He even goes so far as to say that we are to do this for those who are "coming after us." That is what the word "persecute" (Greek - Dioko) means there at the end of verse 44.

Now, all of this would be easy to accept if we never had anyone who hated us. However, as soon as we do, the "rubber hits the road" as it were. What He wants us to do comes into direct conflict with what we want to do. It leaves us asking a question, "Why would I choose to do these things?"

The answer is given in verse 45 with the words, ***"That you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."*** In other words, we choose to do what He wants, to be kind; to speak well of, and to pray for our enemies because He was kind to us, spoke well of us, kind words to us, did good to us, and prayed for us all while we hated Him. For ***"God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us"*** (Romans 5:8, NKJV).

"We love Him because He first loved us." 1 John 4:19 (NKJV)

FLIPPED

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES, DEVOTION 3

Pastor Ryan Story

The entire focal point of the Sermon on the Mount is meant to show those who are wishing to follow Jesus how to live. I am excited that we, as a church, are spending so much time reading the words of our Savior's sermon. The reality is nothing Jesus ever taught was "culturally normal." Everything Jesus ever taught was meant to push to that counter-cultural aspect of living. Thank God for that. Since Jesus spent so much time teaching what was necessary to be considered a citizen in Heaven, it would be a major letdown to get to Heaven and realize that His Kingdom operates the exact same as the earthly one we all reside in.

The section we will be looking at all week ought to challenge you. In Matthew 5:43-48, Jesus teaches about loving your enemy. This is such a crazy thing to teach and I feel this truth transcends the 2000 years since it was spoken. To look at a person who you know hates you, a person who you know wishes ill upon you, and to know a person would rather leave you in a ditch rather than help you and to be told to love them could be classified as insanity.

While reading these verses, I got majorly convicted that as much as I would love to throw the martyr card down and say, "He hate me" (XFL reference for anyone who got that) and force myself into thinking there are those who are my enemies and it is all their issue. The reality is if I am not actively loving every person I encounter in the same way that Jesus loved me, how can I say I am not that person's enemy? Jesus flipped the narrative in my heart. Jesus calls us to love our enemies because He wants us to show who we identify as our Lord. He calls us to love our enemies because it is the best way to show others His love, His mercy, His kindness, and His friendship.

Jesus says in Matthew 5:46, ***"For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?"*** Christ-followers who are reading this, take a second and ask yourself, "Are you only loving those around you who are easy to love, those who love you, encourage you, and help you?" That group is easy to love. However, we as followers of Christ, are aiming to bring glory to the name of Jesus by living as we belong to His eternal Kingdom. We love others because Jesus loved them. We do not make enemies of people, because God sent His Son to ensure we were not enemies of Him. Love those around you in the same way Jesus did. When we love like Jesus, we do not see enemies, we see opportunities to help a person not be an enemy of God. We as followers are not meant to go to war with people over petty things. Go love a person today in hopes that it brings the peace only Jesus' love can bring.

THE PARADOX

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES, DEVOTION 4

Jeannie Yates

"If you can't say something nice, don't say nothing at all." - Thumper (from the movie *"Bambi"*)

Do you remember hearing this from your parents? Or maybe you were the one saying it! It sounds like really good advice; "If you cannot respond with kindness, keep your mouth shut!" That has to be in the Bible somewhere, right?

We know we are supposed to love our neighbors. That was established way back in the Old Testament. Those hearing Jesus deliver this Sermon on the Mount would have been very familiar with the idea of loving your neighbor. The religious leaders would even have debates discussing, "Who is your neighbor?"

I can think of no greater paradox than the one Jesus presents in Matthew 5:43-48, ***"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 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. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."***

It would definitely be easier to take Thumper's advice, but Jesus asks us to do so much more than just tolerate our enemies. The challenge

is to no longer be passive with those that rise up against us but rather take an active role in showing them love. In loving them, we pray. Pray for God to bless them. Pray for God to help us see them how He sees them. Pray for God to heal the discord between us.

MacLaren writes in *Expositions Of Holy Scripture,* "We are not only to allow no stirring of malice in our feelings, but we are to let kindly emotions bear fruit in words blessing the cursers, and in deeds of goodness, and, highest of all, in prayers for those whose hate is bitterest, being founded on religion, and who are carrying it into action in persecution. We cannot hate a man if we pray for him; we cannot pray for him if we hate him."

Everyone can love those that love them back - that is the easy part. We are not called to be like everyone else, we are called to be like Jesus. Jesus is our standard, our measure, and our example for loving enemies. We cannot be satisfied with just "saying nothing at all" but must seek to love our enemies like Jesus loves His enemies as He loves us.

"But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Romans 5:8

LOVING ENEMIES THROUGH PRAYER

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES, DEVOTION 5

Joanna Montgomery

In Matthew 5:44, Christ states we are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Our human reaction to enemies is much different than what Christ requires. The flesh is much easier to follow, but as always, Christ's way proves to be much better for us.

I am thankful I have not had many true enemies. I have had people who may not have liked me for one reason or another; possibly because I received a promotion that they wanted or I was able to accomplish something they were not able to. Even though they may not have liked me, I did not really consider them an enemy.

An enemy is someone who wants to see you fail and consciously works to contribute to that failure. Satan is the enemy of those who love God. He works to destroy us and delights in our failures. In 1 Peter 5:8, we read, ***"Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour."*** That is an enemy, someone who wants to destroy us. I have had a true human enemy. He was a person who purposefully lied about me, sought to cause me to fail, and worked to make me appear incompetent and dishonest to people I worked with. I will call him James.

James started causing me problems the very first day I met him and proceeded to be a problem for me at work for the next twelve years. The first few months, I was mostly confused, but eventually realized James was deliberately persecuting me. I do not believe the persecution was even personal. I was not his first nor his last victim, just a convenient one.

I wish I could say I handled this abusive treatment with grace and the love of God, but in truth, I was confused, very angry most of the time, and tried to find someone in management to hear and believe my side of the story. After several years of failing to find someone of power who cared, I finally turned the situation over to God, which I should have done from the start. As Matthew 5:43-48 directs us, I started praying for James to find salvation through Christ and that I might even be able to share the love of Christ with him. I prayed for him daily. Often, I prayed he would find acceptance in Christ so he would accept others. Other times, I just prayed God would help him get a great promotion and remove him from any immediate contact with me. I am not sure that was the prayer that Christ meant when He said, ***"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,"*** but I will say, I prayed earnestly. I truly did hope God would help him find a better position and remove him from making my life difficult.

I often tell my children that love is not a feeling, it is an action. When we do not "feel" love for someone, we can still show love. Prayer for someone demonstrates love. Prayer softens our hearts when we focus directly on praying for another person. Christ truly loves the lost, even the most unlovely, even me. In my humanity, I may not have the same perspective of love Christ does; however, if we are commanded to do something, we are given the ability to follow that command. God blessed me through my prayer for my enemy. James did receive a great promotion catapulting him where he wanted to go, but greater than that answer to prayer is the work God did in my heart. I do not hate James and I still sincerely pray he finds salvation through Christ. At one time, it was only a prayer I prayed because I felt it was right and I did not know what else to do, but God softened my heart through my faithful prayer for my enemy and now I do not live in bitterness, anger, and hate. I can actually show love to a person in my life who persecuted me heavily.

WHERE IS YOUR TRUST?

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES, DEVOTION 6

Joe Wilson

I have an important question to which we all need to truthfully examine ourselves and answer. Take a moment and ask yourself, "Do I really trust God?" Now, most of us, if we are being honest will say, "Absolutely, without a doubt." Okay, keep that thought. Think about that person who just gets under your skin, that person who takes the contradictory point of view to everything you say, or that person who is sitting in your seat at church on Sunday (that one might sting a little). Do you love them? Do you pray for them? Or, do you make it all about you?

Matthew 5:43-49 (KJV) says, ***"Ye have heard that it hath been said, THOU SHALT LOVE THY NEIGHBOR, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? Do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? Do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."*** (emphasis added)

Read this Scripture again carefully. Here Jesus gives us the directions and guidance on how to handle these types of situations. As I read, I looked and was unable to locate where it states, "Only if it is convenient or easy." Loving our enemies or better yet, our perceived enemies, is not always an easy thing to do, but in the end, it can be very peaceful and rewarding when we trust in God.

Romans 12:19 (KJV) says, ***"Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord."***

Finally, as we go on the path that God has put before us all, an older hymn written in 1874 comes to mind. Let the chorus of that hymn rest in your heart this very day.

Only trust Him, only trust Him.
Only trust Him now.
He will save you, He will save you.
He will save you now.

Again, I ask you, "Do we really trust God?"

OUR MISSION

Matthew 28:19-20: ***"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."***

REACH

At The River Church, you will often hear the phrase, "we don't go to church, we are the Church." We believe that as God's people, our primary purpose and goal is to go out and make disciples of Jesus Christ. We encourage you to reach the world in your local communities.

GATHER

Weekend Gatherings at The River Church are all about Jesus, through singing, giving, serving, baptizing, taking the Lord's Supper, and participating in messages that are all about Jesus and bringing glory to Him. We know that when followers of Christ gather together in unity, it's not only a refresher it's bringing life-change.

GROW

Our Growth Communities are designed to mirror the early church in Acts as having ***"all things in common."*** They are smaller collections of believers who spend time together studying the Word, knowing and caring for one another relationally, and learning to increase their commitment to Christ by holding one another accountable.

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