

~ Lesson 1 ~

# A Blessed Life

(Part 1)

Matthew 5:3-6

Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount with statements that are commonly called the Beatitudes. In these verses, He described those who were blessed. This word does not merely mean that one is *happy*. Rather, to be blessed means to be *approved of God*. This results in true joy that surpasses the temporary moments of “happiness” in this life. Let us consider the Beatitudes and see how the life of a disciple is a blessed life.

## **The Poor in Spirit**

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3).*

To be “*poor in spirit*” means to be *humble*. This is the first – and arguably the most fundamental – characteristic that one must have in order to be a disciple of Christ. There are two reasons why humility is vital for disciples. First, we must recognize our place before God. The psalmist wrote, “*Know that the Lord Himself is God; it is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; we are His people and the sheep of His pasture*” (Psalm 100:3). Elsewhere he expressed his recognition of his insignificance in God’s creation: “*When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have*

*ordained; what is man that You take thought of him, and the son of man that You care for him?"* (Psalm 8:3-4). This type of humility that understands the greatness of God and how vastly inferior we are to Him is necessary if we are to serve Him acceptably.

Second, we must approach His instructions with humility. James wrote, *"Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls"* (James 1:21). We must have humility when studying the Bible. If we do not, then we will feel no reason to change our lives to conform to His standard. If we fail to recognize that continuing to follow our will leads to destruction (cf. Proverbs 14:12), we will not follow God's way that leads to life.

The *"poor in spirit"* are blessed in that they can be part of *"the kingdom of heaven."* This term is used throughout Matthew's gospel to refer to the church (cf. Matthew 3:2; 4:17; 16:18-19; *et al.*). This is the greatest of all kingdoms and humility is required to be part of it. This is the opposite of pride that is characteristic of human kingdoms in general. Jesus told His disciples, *"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant"* (Matthew 20:25-26). We must avoid this attitude. Instead, we must remain humble in heart so that we can be a faithful citizen in the Lord's kingdom.

## **Those Who Mourn**

*"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted"* (Matthew 5:4).

In this context, to “*mourn*” is primarily referring to one having sorrow over sin. Paul described it as godly sorrow in his second letter to Corinth: “*For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death*” (2 Corinthians 7:10). It is the mourning of repentance – guilt over the sin that one has committed that motivates one to make corrections in order to be right before God.

However, it is also true that we sorrow over the hardships and trials of life. Job said, “*Man, who is born of woman, is short-lived and full of turmoil*” (Job 14:1). Jesus recognized this as He made His appeal to those who are “*weary and heavy-laden*” (Matthew 11:28).

Those who “*mourn*” are blessed in that they will be “*comforted*.” Those who sorrow over sin can be comforted in the fact that the Lord offers forgiveness. Before healing the paralytic, Jesus told him, “*Take courage, son; your sins are forgiven*” (Matthew 9:2). If we appreciate the great gift that forgiveness is, we will see it as a great encouragement to us. Paul, in quoting from the psalmist, wrote, “*Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account*” (Romans 4:7-8; cf. Psalm 32:1-2).

Also, if we suffer in life, the Lord offers comfort. Paul wrote, “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ*” (2 Corinthians 1:3-5).

Ultimately, if we follow the Lord we will be comforted in heaven, a place where God *“will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away”* (Revelation 21:4). Though we may suffer in this life, if we are of the attitude where we sorrow over our sin, we can receive comfort from the Lord.

## The Gentle

*“Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth”* (Matthew 5:5).

When we read Jesus’ words of one being *“gentle”* or *“meek”* (KJV), we should not immediately associate it with passiveness, weakness, or timidity. This characteristic is related to humility. Those to whom Jesus referred here are those who have a quiet determination to obey the Lord regardless of the consequences. He expects His disciples to follow Him no matter what might come as a result. He said elsewhere, *“If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me”* (Luke 9:23). [We will notice more about the consequences of discipleship in the next lesson.]

Those who are *“gentle”* or *“meek”* are blessed in that they will *“inherit the earth.”* The word translated *earth* means *“the land.”* As Jesus was speaking to a Jewish audience, this would have brought to their minds the land of Canaan – the promised land. However, Jesus was using *figurative* language. The land that they would inherit was not the physical land of Canaan. Rather, the inheritance of *“the land”* was symbolically referring to the inheritance in heaven. In his first epistle, Peter

wrote about this *“inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you”* (1 Peter 1:4).

Jesus said that the inheritance of heaven was for those who are meek and gentle. Remember, to be meek and gentle is to have a quiet determination to obey the Lord, even though it is often associated with *weakness* by those in the world. However, the Lord’s disciples recognize that our reward is not obtained by our own strength – even though we are called to obey – but by trusting in God. Paul wrote, *“For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day”* (2 Timothy 1:12). Those who are meek and gentle will have enough trust in the Lord to continue in faithful service despite the hardships that come as a result.

## **Those Who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness**

*“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied”* (Matthew 5:6).

To be *righteous* is to be right by God’s standard. Paul told the saints in Rome, *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘But the righteous man shall live by faith’”* (Romans 1:16-17). Since the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel, we are to obey the gospel in order to be righteous. As John wrote, *“Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous”* (1 John 3:7).

Righteousness is the state in which one is following God's standard. It is not the result of following man's standard. Paul addressed this with regard to his Jewish brethren: *"For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes"* (Romans 10:2-4). Pursuing a standard of righteousness that has been invented or adopted by man prevents one from conforming to the standard of righteousness found in Christ.

As Jesus said we must *"hunger and thirst for righteousness,"* He emphasized the need for us to have an earnest desire for it. Disciples of Christ must have a zeal for doing the works of God. Paul told Titus that those who have been redeemed by Christ are to be *"zealous for good deeds"* (Titus 2:14).

Those who *"hunger and thirst for righteousness"* are blessed in that they will *"be satisfied."* It is not just that they will reach a state in which they are righteous, but they will receive the reward of righteousness. John wrote, *"Now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming. If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him"* (1 John 2:28-29). The way we can have confidence as we look forward to the return of Christ is to practice righteousness. This is important for us to remember. Salvation is not by grace alone; we must live righteously. Jesus said, *"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter"* (Matthew 7:21).

## Questions on Lesson 1

1. As Jesus used the word in the Beatitudes, what does the word "*blessed*" mean?
2. Why is humility a fundamental characteristic for a disciple?
3. What is "*the kingdom of heaven*"?
4. How does the Lord provide comfort for "*those who mourn*"?





~ Lesson 2 ~

# A Blessed Life

(Part 2)

Matthew 5:7-12

As we continue with the Beatitudes, remember that when Jesus described those who were *blessed*, it was about more than just *happiness*. This was about *God's approval*. This is especially important as we get to the end of the Beatitudes when Jesus spoke of those who would be persecuted. There will be times when those who are "*blessed*" are those who are suffering. Despite this, a disciple will enjoy God's approval and can look forward to eternal happiness.

## The Merciful

*"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy" (Matthew 5:7).*

Those who are part of the Lord's kingdom are to show *mercy* to others. In essence, Jesus' point is that we are to practice what has become known as the "golden rule" – do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Jesus made this point later in His sermon: "*In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets*" (Matthew 7:12).

When Jesus taught about prayer, He said that one of the things that should be included in the prayers of His disciples

is an appeal to God to forgive us of our sins (Matthew 6:12). He then explained that showing mercy to others is necessary for God to forgive us: *“For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions”* (Matthew 6:14-15).

Those who are *“merciful”* are blessed in that they will *“receive mercy”* from God. To receive mercy means that we will not receive what we deserve. The Scriptures teach that the punishment for sin is spiritual death. Paul wrote, *“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Romans 6:23). The gift of eternal life is part of God’s grace – giving us something we do not deserve. Yet His mercy is necessarily connected with it because He allows us to avoid eternal destruction for our sin – withholding from us what we do deserve.

On this point of the grace and mercy that God extends to us, it is certainly true that salvation is a free gift because we cannot do anything to earn it on our own. However, this does not mean that salvation is unconditional. As the gift of salvation is in Christ, we must remember who it is that He will save. The Hebrew writer indicated that Jesus is *“to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation”* (Hebrews 5:9). God’s mercy does not negate the requirement He has given to obey Him.

## **The Pure in Heart**

*“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God”* (Matthew 5:8).

To be *pure* is to be free from sin. While it is true that *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”* (Romans 3:23), the people of God are to strive diligently to remove sin from their lives (cf. Matthew 5:48; 1 John 2:1). This is essential because of the nature of God. John wrote, *“This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light and in Him there is no darkness at all”* (1 John 1:5). Because of this, He cannot have fellowship with darkness. So John continued, *“If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin”* (1 John 1:6-7). The disciples of Jesus cannot be content in sin, but must aim for purity.

However, *purity* is not just about one’s outward appearance. As Jesus said, we are to be *“pure in heart.”* We are not (or should not be) making an outward show of righteousness while continuing to be corrupt on the inside. Jesus condemned the scribes and Pharisees for this: *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness”* (Matthew 23:27-28). It is important that our hearts are clean as this will impact our lives as a whole. The wise man wrote, *“Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life”* (Proverbs 4:23).

Those who are *“pure in heart”* are blessed in that they will *“see God.”* This is emphasizing the blessing of *fellowship* with God. This is what John meant when he wrote, *“But if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with*

*one another*" (1 John 1:7). This fellowship with God eventually leads to a home in heaven where we will actually see God. Later in his first epistle, John wrote, *"See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure"* (1 John 3:1-3). As we hope to see God and spend eternity with Him, we strive to keep our hearts pure before Him.

## **The Peacemakers**

*"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God"* (Matthew 5:9).

The people of God are to be *peacemakers* because God sought to make peace with us. Paul told the brethren in Colossae, *"For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross"* (Colossians 1:19-20). We can be reconciled to God and have peace with Him if we will obey Him (cf. Hebrews 5:9). As Paul wrote a few verses earlier, we are to *"walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work"* (Colossians 1:10).

Because of the emphasis that the Lord has placed upon *peace*, His disciples are to be peacemakers. Paul told the Romans, *"If possible, as far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men"* (Romans 12:18). Of course, as we will notice in the next

point, peace is not always possible. However, it should not be the fault of God's people when peace is not present. We are to *"pursue peace with all men"* (Hebrews 12:14).

Those who are *"peacemakers"* are blessed in that they will *"be called the sons of God."* There are two reasons for this. First, we can prove to be *"sons of God"* by sharing a common purpose with Him. As Jesus always did the things of the Father (John 8:29), we must do the same. Paul encouraged the saints in Rome to do this: *"And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect"* (Romans 12:2).

Second, those who are *"called the sons of God"* have the blessing of sharing in the inheritance from the Father. Peter wrote, *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you"* (1 Peter 1:3-4). If we will be born again – becoming the children of God – and continue to follow Him, we can look forward to that inheritance.

## **Those Who Have Been Persecuted**

*"Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way*

*they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:10-12).*

The other Beatitudes have been about what we do, say, and think. This one is different in that it is based upon our response to what others do and say. It should also be noted that Jesus spent more time discussing this one. It is harder to see how being persecuted is part of a “*blessed*” life. Yet we see from Jesus’ words that this is the case.

In these verses, Jesus brought attention to a pattern of persecution. Just as the prophets were persecuted, His disciples should expect to be persecuted as well. Even today, we should expect persecution ranging from insults (Matthew 5:11), slander (1 Peter 4:4), and in some cases even death (Revelation 2:10). The Scriptures plainly warn us that God’s people will suffer persecution from godless men. Paul told Timothy, “*Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*” (2 Timothy 3:12). Peter wrote to prepare Christians to face persecution as well: “*Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you*” (1 Peter 4:12).

Those who are “*persecuted for the sake of righteousness*” are blessed in that they will have their place in “*the kingdom of heaven.*” This reward brings us back to where Jesus started the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3). As His disciples, we need to remember that no matter how much we have to suffer in this life, we cannot be separated from Him. Paul wrote, “*Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, ‘For Your sake we are being put to death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’ But in all these things we*

*overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, not any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:35-39).*

Furthermore, though we may be persecuted, we can look forward to heaven. As Paul was imprisoned and facing death, he told Timothy, *“For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing” (2 Timothy 4:6-8).* This reward is available to all of us if we will remain faithful to the Lord.

## **Conclusion**

The life of a disciple is a *blessed* life, though it is not always evident in this life – particularly when we are facing persecution for our faith. Yet if we humbly follow after the Lord and submit to His will, He will be with us and will bless us richly.

## Questions on Lesson 2

1. What does it mean to “*receive mercy*”?
2. How is it possible to be “*pure in heart*” when “*all have sinned*” (Romans 3:23)?
3. What did Jesus mean when He said the “*pure in heart*” will “*see God*”?
4. Why are the people of God to be peacemakers?





~ Lesson 3 ~

# A Righteous Life

(Part 1)

Matthew 5:13-20

After describing the life of a disciple as *blessed*, Jesus directed His message to a discussion of *righteousness*. He touched on this in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:6). As we noticed in the previous lesson, to be *righteous* is to be right by God's standard, not man's. The verses we will consider here expand on that idea. We can see from Jesus' words that the life of a disciple is a *righteous* life.

## Example to Others

*"You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven"* (Matthew 5:13-16).

Jesus used three analogies to emphasize the fact that we are to be examples to others. First, He said that we are "*the salt*

of the earth" (Matthew 5:13). Salt is a *preservative*. Of course, this does not mean that if we can increase the number of righteous people in the world, then God's judgment will be delayed. Paul told the Athenians that God has "*fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness*" (Acts 17:31). Instead, we act as a "preservative" in that by living righteously, we are preserving what is good and right on the earth. By our righteous example, we are showing others what is right and encouraging them by our influence to be good as well.

Second, Jesus said we are "*the light of the world*" (Matthew 5:14). Light is important because it *shows the way*. The psalmist wrote, "*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path*" (Psalm 119:105). Again, by our example as we are directed by the word of God, we are showing others the way that they should go. Paul encouraged the brethren in Philippi to be different from the world: "*Prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world*" (Philippians 2:15). Jesus explained the clear and unmistakable difference between right (light) and wrong (darkness): "*This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed*" (John 3:19-20). Those who do right – as long as they do not compromise – will not blend in with those who do wrong. By our actions, we highlight the contrast between right and wrong.

Third, Jesus described His disciples as "*a city set on a hill*" (Matthew 5:14). This means we are *highly visible*, emphasizing again our example. Not only is a city on a hill

highly visible, but it is also in a position of strength. The wise man wrote, *“The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous runs into it and is safe”* (Proverbs 18:10). Those who are righteous have the strength of God to protect them. We are to live righteously because we trust in God to save us.

Our righteousness should be visible to others. Jesus said that others should *“see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven”* (Matthew 5:16). We are to be an example to others in all that we do. The way we do this is through righteous living.

### **Emphasis on the Importance of Law**

*“Do not think 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 shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven”* (Matthew 5:17-19).

Many in the religious world have a misunderstanding when it comes to *law* as it relates to our following of Christ. They believe we should obey the “spirit” of the law rather than the “letter” of the law. In other words, they think we should focus on what we perceive the *purpose* of God’s law to be rather than the *details* of His instructions.

However, what we see in Jesus’ words is a respect for

God's law – even the “letter” of the law. Jesus said, *“Until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished”* (Matthew 5:18). God expects us to reflect this attitude of respect for His word so that we will be careful in our handling of it. Paul told Timothy, *“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth”* (2 Timothy 2:15). How careful are we to be? Consider Jesus' confrontation with the Sadducees in which He proved that there is a resurrection based upon *the tense of a verb* (present tense instead of past tense) in the Biblical text: *“But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God: ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.’ When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at His teaching”* (Matthew 22:31-33). If we are to properly learn and apply God's word, we must exercise care in our handling of it and not ignore the details.

We know that the Law of which Jesus spoke has since been nailed to the cross (Colossians 2:14). But remember Jesus' purpose in this sermon – to show what a disciple is to be like. Christ's disciples are to respect God's word enough that we care about following even the details of it.

### **Exceed the Righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees**

*“For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven”* (Matthew 5:20).

The scribes and Pharisees were the religious elites of that

day. Jesus' point is that those who seem to be religious are not our standard. We follow Christ, not other men. Paul wrote to the brethren in Corinth to warn them about this: *"Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, 'I am of Paul,' and 'I of Apollos,' and 'I of Cephas,' and 'I of Christ.' Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?"* (1 Corinthians 1:12-13). No matter who the men are that we might be considering, we cannot follow them over Christ.

The scribes and Pharisees focused on the "letter" of the law to the exclusion of the "spirit" of the law. As we noticed in the previous point, the "letter" of the law is important; but we cannot neglect the purpose for which the law was given. Jesus condemned the scribes and Pharisees for this later: *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others"* (Matthew 23:23). We cannot neglect either the details of God's law or the broader concepts that are taught in it.

We must also not look to God's word in order to find "loopholes" to justify our behavior. This was what these individuals were doing, and Jesus exposed them for it. *"And He answered and said to them, 'Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, "Honor your father and mother," and "He who speaks evil of father or mother is to be put to death." But you say, "Whoever says to his father or mother, 'Whatever I have that would help you has been given to God,' he is not to honor his father or his mother." And by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition'"* (Matthew 15:3-6). They meticulously searched God's







~ Lesson 4 ~

# A Righteous Life

(Part 2)

Matthew 5:21-48

As we continue examining the idea of *righteousness*, we will see that Jesus makes it clear that His disciples were to have a certain attitude toward God's law. God's commands were not something that could be ignored. Furthermore, Jesus emphasized the need to do more than just focus on the letter of the law. To be *righteous* means we understand and respect the principles behind the laws of God.

## Explaining the "Spirit" of the Law

After discussing the importance of following the "letter" of the law, Jesus explained why it was important to follow the "spirit" of the law. This was not for the purpose of finding a "loophole" – as the scribes and Pharisees did – but to more fully understand and fulfill God's will that was expressed through His commandments.

*"You have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not commit murder,' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever said, 'You fool,'*

*shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there 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.*

*“Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown in prison. Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent” (Matthew 5:21-26).*

Murder was explicitly condemned under the Old Law (Exodus 20:13). The condemnation of one who “*sheds man’s blood*” was given much earlier to Noah (Genesis 9:6). In the New Testament, Paul indicated that murder was a sin that was “*contrary to sound teaching*” (1 Timothy 1:9-10). However, there was a reason why murder was condemned and why accidental killings (Numbers 35:10-12, 22-25) or acting in self-defense (Exodus 22:2) were not. The reason was because murder involved *anger* against another person. Jesus said, “*Everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court*” (Matthew 5:22). Anger is classified as one of the “*deeds of the flesh*” that prevents one from inheriting the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:19-21). John wrote, “*Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him*” (1 John 3:15). Anger is condemned even if it never leads to murder.

*“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 lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell"* (Matthew 5:27-30).

While all forms of fornication were condemned in the Law (Leviticus 18:6-23), the Ten Commandments emphasized *adultery* as being contrary to God's will (Exodus 20:14). Paul told the brethren in Corinth that *"the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God"* (1 Corinthians 6:9). This number included *"adulterers."* However, Jesus explained that the condemnation of adultery also prohibited one from fantasizing about the act of adultery. The problem with lust is that it leads to sin. James wrote, *"But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death"* (James 1:14-15). Because of the danger posed by lust and the unrighteousness produced by it, Job made a commitment: *"I have made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a young woman"* (Job 31:1, NIV). Lust is condemned even if it never progresses as far as one committing adultery.

*"It was said, 'Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce'; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits*

*adultery*" (Matthew 5:31-32).

Jesus cited the instruction given in the Law of Moses about putting away one's wife (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). Later, Jesus would be asked specifically about this text (Matthew 19:7). The Pharisees thought that Jesus ignored the alleged permission to divorce when He explained God's marriage law: "*Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate*" (Matthew 19:4-6). The instruction in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 was not given because God was granting new permissions for divorce; rather, it was given to regulate and, more importantly, limit divorce. This was why Jesus said, "*Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way*" (Matthew 19:8). The Lord expects "*marriage...to be held in honor among all*" (Hebrews 13:4). Disregarding one's marriage vows was condemned even if one met certain "legal" requirements in order to end their marriage.

*"Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.' But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything beyond these is of evil"* (Matthew 5:33-37).

The Law of Moses stated, *"You shall not swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am the Lord"* (Leviticus 19:12). The wise man wrote, *"When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it; for He takes no delight in fools. Pay what you vow!"* (Ecclesiastes 5:4). However, just because they were told to be sure they fulfilled their promises when they made a vow, it did not mean they were permitted to fail to keep their word at other times. God's people are to be honest and speak the truth at all times. Paul wrote, *"Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbor, for we are members of one another"* (Ephesians 4:25). To the brethren in Colossae, he wrote, *"Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices"* (Colossians 3:9). Dishonesty is condemned even if one never enters into a "vow."

*"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 an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you"* (Matthew 5:38-42).

In every society, it is necessary for crimes to be punished. The wise man explained what happens when this is not done: *"Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil"* (Ecclesiastes 8:11). Jesus cited a passage that described how punishments ought to be increasingly severe as the crime is more severe (Leviticus 24:17-20). But it is important to

remember who has been given the role of carrying out such punishment. Paul explained that civil authorities have the divinely-given role of punishing crimes: *“For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil”* (Romans 13:3-4). Because of this, he told the saints in Rome, *“Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord”* (Romans 12:19). Taking revenge against someone is condemned even if it was in response to a crime that was committed against the one seeking vengeance.

*“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 causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?”* (Matthew 5:43-47).

Loving one’s neighbor was commanded (Leviticus 19:18). However, the second part of this that they had heard – *“hate your enemy”* – was not part of the law. It was a faulty conclusion that had been drawn based upon the command to love their neighbor. God’s people are to love all people. Paul

told the brethren in Thessalonica, “*And may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you*” (1 Thessalonians 3:12). Hating one’s enemy is condemned even if one still loves his neighbor.

## **Strive to Be Perfect Like God**

*“Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect”* (Matthew 5:48).

At the end of this section, Jesus gave the goal – His disciples are to be like God. Obviously, we will never be sinlessly perfect. Paul made that clear when he wrote, “*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23). But we are to strive for this.

How do we do it? We practice righteousness. John wrote, “*Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous*” (1 John 3:7). We must respect God and His word enough that we follow the “letter” and the “spirit” of the law.

## **Conclusion**

The life of a disciple is a *righteous* life. This means we conform to God’s standard and not man’s. Let us strive to be like God and let our light shine before men.

## **Questions on Lesson 4**

1. Why is murder condemned but not killing someone accidentally?
2. What does it mean to commit adultery in one's heart?
3. What was the one exception that permitted one to put away his/her spouse?
4. Why did Jesus say not to make an oath?





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