

a 300wordsaday.com guide to *The Sermon on the Mount*

Matthew 5:1-7:29

by Jon Swanson

If this were a real book, this would be a preface. But it isn't. Not yet.

Since January 2009, I've been writing [300 word commentaries](#) on following Jesus, usually five a week. For the first year, I worked my way through the book of Matthew. This is the second ebook collection from those commentaries, covering the chapters five-seven of Matthew.

I am open to comments, questions, suggestions about how to format this ebook in a more useful way. In the meantime, however, I care less about formatting and more about helping people understand what following Jesus might look like. As a result, I'm releasing these notes in this format and will go back and revise and repackage as necessary.

I take responsibility for these words and they should not be blamed on the church I get to work at or the people I live with. All quotations are from the New International Version and were clipped out of biblegateway.com.

Biographical note

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Version 1.0: May 2012.

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Table of Contents

<u>Introduction: Without endnotes</u>
<u>What counts as (Matthew 5:1)</u>
<u>The beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-10)</u>
<u>Because of me (Matthew 5:11-12)</u>
<u>Be something useful (Matthew 5:13-16)</u>
<u>Not good enough (Matthew 5:20)</u>
<u>You have heard it said (Matthew 5:21)</u>
<u>I'm sorry you are mad at me. (Matthew 5:23-24)</u>
<u>If you are the president and talk about lust... (Matthew 5:27-30)</u>
<u>But you said. . . (Matthew 5:33-37)</u>
<u>You caught me skipping (Matthew 5:31-32)</u>
<u>Like God (Matthew 5:43-48)</u>
<u>Someone is going to go too far (Matthew 5:38-42)</u>
<u>Like the hypocrites do (Matthew 6:1-18)</u>
<u>Conspiracy (Matthew 6:1-18)</u>
<u>I love to hear you pray (Matthew 6:5-6)</u>
<u>So why do we have to ask (Matthew 6:7-8)</u>
<u>Lord's Prayer: Our Father in heaven (Matthew 6:9)</u>
<u>Lord's Prayer: We pray that your name will always be kept holy (6:9)</u>
<u>Lord's Prayer: Your kingdom (Matthew 6:10)</u>
<u>Lord's Prayer: Enough for today (Matthew 6:11)</u>
<u>Lord's Prayer: That is really hard (Matthew 6:11)</u>
<u>Lord's Prayer: Please take care of me (Matthew 6:12-13)</u>
<u>Fasting (Matthew 6:16-18)</u>
<u>Relationship rewards (Matthew 6:20)</u>
<u>Birds and flowers (Matthew 6:25-34)</u>
<u>Today has enough trouble (Matthew 6:34)</u>
<u>The window or the mirror (Matthew 7:1-2)</u>
<u>A sense of humor (Matthew 7)</u>
<u>On hogs and dogs (Matthew 7:6)</u>
<u>Waiting is hard (Matthew 7:7-12)</u>
<u>Wanna do something about it? (Matthew 7:12)</u>
<u>Gates (Matthew 7:13-14)</u>
<u>Aftermath (Matthew 7:15-23)</u>
<u>Just one thing (Matthew 7:24)</u>
<u>Sandstorm (Matthew 7:24-27)</u>
<u>Epilogue</u>

Introduction: Without endnotes

The Sermon on the Mount. Everyone knows about it. It is Jesus' most famous sermon. But it

wasn't up in the Alps, up on some high mountain. Think high valley, natural amphitheatre. And think sermon notes, the distilled essence. And think.

When I wrote my dissertation, I created endnotes. I generated pages and pages of references to the writing of other people. I pointed to places in books and articles written by other people as I tried to show that what I was saying was consistent with other people, was supported by knowledgeable people, was nothing particularly new. I was writing as one who had no authority and who was borrowing as much as I could.

Many people write blogs and quote other people or refer to famous people or link to their posts. Many people in conversations mention all the famous people they know, all the famous people that know them. When we hear someone with compelling ideas and we *don't* see endnotes, we are pleasantly surprised. We mention them to other people. We drop their name.

That is exactly what people did at the end of the extended teaching recorded in Matthew 5-7. Matthew writes,

When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law. (Matthew 7:28-29)

I understand the teachers of the law. I understand the constant citation of the scholars who have come before me. It gets you tenure. It gets you credibility. It gets you safe.

However, when you are the one who inspired everyone who came before, when one of your nicknames is "Word", anything you said would sound fresh, would sound confident. You aren't having to please anyone else, you aren't having to justify your interpretation. You are merely explaining what you said before. You speak with freedom. You speak with confidence.

People find you refreshing. People find you encouraging. People find you.

In his teaching, rather than *reflect* other scholars, Jesus *created* something for scholars. We are still creating endnotes quoting him.

What counts as (Matthew 5:1)

Jesus says "Blessed" nine times at the beginning of the teaching starting in chapter 5. We look at this list, which is often called "the Beatitudes," and we try to figure out what Jesus meant. Actually, I think, we try to figure out how we can be part of the list.

For example, Jesus says that the poor in spirit will be blessed, that they will have the kingdom of heaven. So, wanting to have the kingdom of heaven, we want to know what poor in spirit means. Does it relate to bank accounts, in which case it turns our usual expectations upside down ("don't

have money in the bank? You have heaven!"). Does it mean spiritually needy, in which case it applies to everyone? Does it mean recognizing spiritual inadequacy?

Once we know the rules, then we can get whatever is in the formula.

I think that Jesus wasn't creating a formula or a list. I think that Jesus is being descriptive (for example, people who are poor in spirit are blessed, because they will not be spiritually poor), rather than prescriptive (If you want to get the kingdom of heaven, then be poor in spirit).

Here's what I think was happening on that hillside:

Jesus sat down up on a hillside. His closest friends came and sat down with him. He looked around at their faces. He looked around at their hearts. And he knew what was in each. And he started to talk. As he looked first at one of the disciples, one that everyone knew was struggling with a really bad sense of himself. He was constantly despairing of ever measuring up spiritually in this group.

Jesus looked into the disciple's face and said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." The disciple looked up, full of hollowness. "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

The beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-10)

Dear friend.

You want to follow God.

You are feeling like you have nothing to offer, like you are at a party where everyone else brings cool gifts and you are still waiting for your last paycheck and so have nothing. You think about how you have done wrong and how often you have messed up, and it makes you want to cry sometimes. You watch other people push to the front with all the "right answers" and you stand back along the edges of the crowd, scuffing your toes in the dirt, uncertain. You want to live the right way so much you can taste it sometimes. You have a dull ache in your chest because you so want to be clean, finally, really clean.

Everyone tells you to give those, um, *people* what they deserve, and you know you want to, but you just can't. You have this need to cut them slack. You try to stay clean. You try to do things for the right reasons. When you look in the mirror and have questions about your motives, you don't do whatever it is you are wondering about. (But doesn't everyone think that way?)

You can't stand watching people fight, and so you wade into the middle. But instead of just getting them to stopping fighting, you start building bridges between them.

You do great stuff. You care deeply. And instead of thanking you, people pick on you.

Mercilessly. Rudely. Maliciously.

You think all this is no big deal. You do it because it's right. You don't see the connection between any of this and following God.

But it is following God. And Jesus says you are blessed. And Jesus will comfort you and care for you and show you mercy and give you all of heaven.

Because of me (Matthew 5:11-12)

Christ followers are dying right now.

I'll be more accurate. They are being killed right now. Because of Jesus. Because they decided, somewhere, somehow, to identify with Jesus, people are being killed and harassed and robbed and tortured and exiled.

Jesus was clear: being identified with Him is dangerous.

He said:

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. [[Matthew 5:11-12](#)]

And then, a couple years later, he was insulted, he was lied about, he was persecuted, and he was killed. He described, ahead of time, what happened to him.

A couple observations:

1. He speaks historically about what only he would know. He says to rejoice because there will be a great reward in heaven, because the prophets were persecuted and, he implies, they got a great reward in heaven. How would Jesus know that? He was there when they got the reward.
2. He speaks predictively about what only he would know. He says to rejoice because there will be a great reward in heaven which, Paul says, happens to Jesus. According to [Philippians 2:5-11](#), He (Jesus) willingly "became obedient to death." God then lifted him up.

But there is a condition.

The persecution comes "because of me."

Sometimes we decide what Jesus would like. We think that He would really like it if we told people to stay off the lawn he made, for example. We don't ask him, we just decide. When people get mad, we think they're mad at him.

They aren't.

They are mad at us for deciding for him and for them what he is saying.

Just let him speak.

Be something useful (Matthew 5:13-16)

Salt and light.

Jesus talks about [being salt and light](#).

Salt seasons. It preserves. It melts ice. It helps make homemade ice cream. It corrodes paint. It makes water undrinkable. It makes the same water support life. It is simple. It is natural. It is found in lots of locations, from deep underground to deep in your veins.

Light illuminates. When it is in the distance, like a lighthouse, it helps you find where you are. When it is in your hand, like a lantern, it helps you see your path. When it is in your eyes, like a floodlight, it is blinding. When you are trying to hide, it is painfully revealing. In a fireplace, it is delightful. In the attic, it is devastating.

Jesus talks about being salt and being light, and if you search online for salt and light, you get thousands of sermons on this text.

He talks about being the salt of the earth and then talks about salt losing its flavor.

I don't understand. I mean, I understand the metaphor - if salt ever were to lose its saltiness, it would be worthless. But I don't know if it ever could happen. Lots of preachers explain it.

But I think that if I heard Jesus talk about this thing that seems to make no sense, I'd get the point.

He talks about the pointlessness of a light that is under a basket.

I do understand that. A basket over a lamp hides it. Until, of course, the basket catches on fire and burns up everything around.

If I heard someone use that metaphor, I'd understand it.

With these two images of absurdities of salt and light, Jesus says, "Be what you are made to be, do what you are made to do."

In other words, be followers.

Not good enough (Matthew 5:20)

Pick the most spiritual person you know. The one that knows all the rules. The one that keeps them all. The one that has spent his whole life studying. The one who has cleaned every bad habit

out of her closet. The one that prays every day. The one that has a quiet time every night. The one that has memorized more of the Bible than you have read. The one that, try as you might, has no faults.

I mean, really has no faults.

The person that is so good that you decide that there is no hope for you. The person that you try to argue with about God and they win every time. The one that seems to have no questions, no doubts. The one that knows the answer every time in Sunday school. The one that has just the right video to recommend for that problem, that has the right verse. that knows the right song, that sings with the right choir.

You know that person?

Jesus says that they aren't going to heaven. So neither are you. Neither am I.

Of course, he doesn't stop there. Or, more accurately, he doesn't end there.

He starts with, "unless you are far more righteous than that person..."

Those people, who were called Pharisees by the people listening to Jesus this day he was sitting on a hillside talking, were the perfect people. And when Jesus says that even they weren't righteous enough, a murmur must have wafted through the crowd. People must have looked around the edges of the crowd for a Pharisee. People must have felt a mixture of fear and despair.

Jesus had said the Pharisees didn't measure up (fear). He said no one did (despair).

It's good that he was righteousness.

You have heard it said (Matthew 5:21)

How many of us spend much of our lives based on "you have heard it said?"

This is what *we've* been taught, we hear. This is how it *should* happen. This is what's been passed on from generation to generation.

I know that it is easy to pick on "this is how we've always done it." I know the story about the guy who stands with his hand over his shoulder, for no reason other than when his predecessor's predecessor stood in that place, there was a horse's halter to hold on to.

Picking on that kind of thinking is easy.

What Jesus did is much more challenging.

Six times he starts with "you have heard it said." Each time the rule came from the law given to Moses. And then Jesus makes the rule more difficult. What started as rules about behavior Jesus turns into rules about *attitudes* toward behavior.

Murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, revenge, love. Jesus captures a list of topics at the core of being human, a list of topics all about relationships between human. And then he takes this list and makes it apply to every one of us.

We may not murder but we all know hatred, for example. We may not sleep around with our bodies, but we do with our eyes and our minds. We feel vindicated by vengeance, but we all fail to bend over backwards.

This sermon's list of blessings would have made many listeners feel good about themselves. The hard-driving list of reinterpreted obligations would have hammered at the audience, one blow after another. Because, after all, while I don't hate anyone, if I am honest with myself and with you, I do consider some people foolish. People I know. People who know me. It's what I do.

That's like murder.

I confess.

I'm sorry you are mad at me. (Matthew 5:23-24)

If you are bringing your sacrifice to the temple, Jesus says, and you remember that someone is angry at you, go to them and make it right. Then come back and offer your sacrifice, give your gift, fulfill your obligation.

But Jesus, what if they made up the problem?

[silence]

Okay, that doesn't happen very often. But Jesus, what if they don't forgive me?

[silence]

But Jesus, what if I've tried everything I could think of and they are still angry with me?

[silence]

Okay, I will have tried. And their response isn't my problem. But Jesus, why should it matter if they are mad at me? You just talked about me being angry and that being like murder. And I'm not angry.

[silence]

But Jesus, are you saying that if I know someone is mad at me and I don't do anything to stop it, it's like letting them commit murder and not stepping in?

[silence]

But Jesus, are you saying that my knowing that someone is upset with me might interfere with my ability to bring you my gifts? That I might be worried about avoiding them as I walk around?

[silence]

But Jesus, isn't there time later? Or are you suggesting that it is more important to have relationship restored with people than it is to bring you a sacrifice?

[silence]

But Jesus, are you suggesting that if a name comes to my mind when I am bringing my gift to worship, that maybe that name is one that *you* are reminding me of, that maybe you know what is happening?

[silence]

But Jesus, what if I just don't want to? Can't it just be me and God in worship without worrying about other people?

[silence]

But Jesus, I can't. I need help.

"Okay."

If you are the president and talk about lust... (Matthew 5:27-30)

...in an interview in Playboy, and you are a Southern Baptist, [you get in trouble](#). That's what happened to Jimmy Carter. People laugh at you. People think you are odd. People don't want to understand you. You almost lose the election.

That's what happens when you take this 'following the words of Jesus' process too seriously.

Or maybe he was not taking it too seriously.

In [Matthew 5:27-30](#), Jesus says that he isn't really interested in technical obedience, in being able to say "But I didn't touch." What he understands pretty clearly is that when we are thinking about something, we aren't thinking about something else. When we are thinking about green, for example, we aren't thinking about blue. When we are thinking about "Lost" we aren't thinking about "CSI: New York." When we are thinking about ice cream sundaes, we are not thinking about successfully completing marathons.

When we are thinking about that girl's body we are not thinking about loving our wife.

In fact, when we take a second look or a third look toward *her*, we are taking a second step and a third step away from understanding more about our wife, about how to love her in the same way, with the same intensity and purity that Christ loves the church and gave himself up for her.

Adultery is violating the marriage covenant. And the violations start when you turn away, not when you touch someone else.

It's funny. I think, "How would Jesus know? Why so much intensity that he uses the image of gouging out an eye or chopping off a hand?"

Because I'm pretty sure he didn't really want people to do that.

But maybe the answer is in the image I quoted, the one from [Ephesians 5](#) about Christ loving the church.

Maybe, just maybe, he understood being the rejected one.

But you said. . . (Matthew 5:33-37)

"Yes. "

"I will do that."

"If you ask me, then I will do that."

"I will do that, cross my heart and hope to die."

"If you will do this, just this one time, I promise that I will do that, I swear on a stack of Bibles."

"I know that I've promised a thousand times and I've messed up every time, but this time, I'm really, really serious, and I mean it this time, and see, my fingers aren't crossed behind my back and this time I won't try to weasel out if it and this time, I promise on my mother's grave that I will do it."

"You have to believe me, I am completely different this time, you can ask anyone, I swear to you, I will do this."

"Please, what do I have to do for you to believe that I will do this?"

"May God strike me dead if I don't do this."

When Jesus started talking about oaths and about swearing in [Matthew 5:33-37](#), he wasn't talking about the #@%&* kind of swearing. He was talking about people who couldn't be trusted. He was talking about people who had broken their word and so had to add support to their commitments. He was talking about people who had said that they would do something and hadn't and then said, "this time I will, so help me God."

He was talking about people like us.

The simplest thing to do to have people trust you is to say "yes" and then do "yes."

Of course, in the middle of a busy day when there isn't time to think clearly, it may be simple to say "yes" just to get the noise of requests to stop. But Jesus wanted "yes" to actually mean "yes."

It's about trust.

You caught me skipping (Matthew 5:31-32)

One of the things about following Jesus is that you can't skip.

I can, of course. I can jump wherever I want. I can ignore whatever I want. I can make my own choices, however I want.

Just like skipping [Matthew 5:31-32](#). If you are reading through Matthew while reading these words, you may have noticed that I went from murder to adultery to oaths. I skipped divorce.

It's uncomfortable, that passage. No one is in favor of murder. No one is in favor of adultery. No one cares about oaths. And really, in general, no one is in favor of divorce. But divorce is really hard for us.

What do we say, after all? We feel like we are judging family and friends if we talk about it in terms of right and wrong. And yet Jesus here puts strict parameters on divorce.

And Jesus didn't skip the subject.

In keeping with the contrasts (You have heard it said, I say to you), he first states the technically acceptable standard for obedience and then sets his standard.

And it is a difficult standard.

And here is what I do.

When someone asks me what I think about difficult texts, challenging words from Jesus, I walk around my desk and I sit next to them and I put myself on the same side of the words as they are. I want it to be clear that the Scripture is speaking to both of us.

And I say, "Here's what it says. Let's talk about why you are wondering."

If someone is wondering because they want to judge, *that's* wrong.

If someone is wondering because they want permission to do what they know is wrong, then *that's* wrong.

But if someone is wondering because they want to understand what Jesus means, then we talk about options.

The opposite of skipping isn't Bible thumping. It's Bible listening.

Like God (Matthew 5:43-48)

Be like God. Love your enemies.

That's what Jesus is saying in [Matthew 5:43-48](#).

He starts with enemies.

When it rains, it rains on everyone. Though we wish there were little clouds that followed some people and little suns that followed others, it rains on everyone. Everyone in the parking lot I'm looking at as I drink my coffee is seeing sunshine and knowing this brief day of February warmth.

"It's not fair," we say when good stuff happens to people we don't like, to people who are unkind. "It's not fair," we say when bad stuff happens to people we like, to people who are caring and loving and spiritual.

But God is capable of being even-handed, of giving the warm and cool, the sun and the rain, on farmers who love him and on farmers who despise him. He is capable of being even-handed, of letting roses grow in the gardens of people who plot destruction and in the gardens of the godly.

And it isn't fair at all.

But it gives credence to the command to love your enemies. Because God does.

But what if they are actually persecuting you? What then? How do you love them then?

Jesus says "pray for them." And though we would tend to have those prayers sound like "God, destroy them," that's not much of an option, at least not from Jesus.

See, part of our invitation in following Jesus is to look at how he lived and to live like that. And when we look at Luke 23, and we read that Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, because they don't know what they are doing," we find out what he meant by saying, "pray for your persecutors."

Hanging on a cross, praying for his enemies, asking for forgiveness.

Like Father, like Son.

Someone is going to go too far (Matthew 5:38-42)

Someone, this week, is going to go too far.

Someone is going to ask more of you than they should ask.

Someone is going to insult you.

Someone is going to ask for more than they deserve.

Someone is going to go too far.

You know that it will happen. It happens more to you than to others, perhaps. But it's going to happen.

You are going to have to decide, in that moment, how to react.

It will be completely understandable to snap back. It will make complete sense to do precisely what is required and no more. It is to be expected to do what is expected.

I wouldn't hold it against you at all.

But then, of course, we both would have to figure out what Jesus was talking about when he said to do the unexpected, to go beyond the acceptable response to the insults and attacks sure to come this week.

Because Jesus is saying, well in advance of the insult, to plan to respond differently.

He says you are going to get the back of the hand, someone will insult you with a slap to the face. You have been trained and permitted and encouraged to slap that person back. Your tongue is ready to return the criticism; your mind is rehearsing the devastatingly sarcastic reply.

He says, Jesus says, don't do it. Instead, start planning now, start rehearsing in your head, turning your face and silently offering the other cheek.

Wait, you say.

Does that mean that if it is an abusive situation that we are to stay in it?

Wait, I say, are you?

Because if you aren't and you are raising that question rather than preparing for how you will respond to the insult that will come this week, prepare.

Like the hypocrites do (Matthew 6:1-18)

The church is full of hypocrites.

That's what people say. I've heard it said. It's hard to argue with that statement, mostly because I look in the mirror. I go to church. I have huge gaps between what I do and what I want to do. I say noble things and don't do them. That's usually what people are talking about when they talk about hypocrites and church.

"You say you're a Christian and then you do ____"

But Jesus seems to be thinking about a different kind of hypocrite, people who do noble things but for the wrong reasons. He identifies three areas of behavior where hypocrites do things the wrong way: giving, praying, and fasting. These three areas of behavior are perfect for creating an appearance of spirituality. Helping out poor people, that's important to do. And praying, what could be more spiritual than praying. And fasting, well, that kind of self denial is amazing.

But, Jesus says, don't be public, be private.

Don't do it for the attention you get. Don't do it for the compliments you get, for the good feeling you have when people notice your actions. And don't make it easy for people to notice your actions.

If the only time you give is when you get a tax deduction or when you find out someone else is giving or when there is a wall of recognition, then by all means help. But don't expect God to care.

And if the only time you talk with God is when people are listening, and then with a deep voice and flowery language, enjoy their comments about how much they enjoy when you pray. But don't expect God to care what you say.

Because you wouldn't care what I said if I talked to you only when people were listening.

Conspiracy (Matthew 6:1-18)

Jesus talks about doing things in secret. More accurately, he talks about doing three things secretly-giving, praying, and fasting. He seems to be talking about motives, about not doing good things only to impress other people.

As he talks, he is contrasting recognition from people with recognition from God. He suggests that the latter is more important than the former.

I've had people wonder whether they lost out with God if someone found out about their giving. I know of people who are concerned about praying in public, who are afraid of praying so other people hear because of this concern with pride.

It seems to me, however, that there is a risk of negative motivation. We focus on the 'don't' part of these sentences and the potential of punishment. But what if it isn't about avoiding pride? What if Jesus' greatest concern isn't with avoiding people knowing.

What if his biggest interest is pursuing a conspiratorial relationship with the Father?

You know the feeling when you work with someone else to plan a wonderful surprise? A surprise where some third person will get what they've always wanted? A surprise where that third person must never know how this happened, but that's okay because you and your co-conspirator can celebrate together?

That's what Jesus is inviting, that kind of relationship with the Father. Work with the Father in your giving. The people you are helping? Do your best to not let them know. Do your best to not let the press know, to not brag about it, even quietly to a few close friends. In fact, Jesus says, don't even let your hands talk to each other.

But know that the Father knows. Know that you can share a laugh, a knowing wink, with Him.

I love to hear you pray (Matthew 6:5-6)

I confess. I have been told that I pray well in public.

I don't quite know what to do with that compliment. I mean, on one hand I'm not talking to her. I'm talking to God. It is *almost* completely irrelevant whether she loves to hear me pray. What

matters far more is whether God loves to hear me pray.

In fact, there have been times that people have expressed concern that I pray too quietly or that my voice gets softer. I want to say to them, "I'm not talking to you."

On the other hand, I have times when I am responsible for praying so that people *can* hear. There are times that I am leading in prayer, helping other people to focus on conversing with God. At those times, I'm like a spokesperson for a large group. One person talks, the others nod and agree and say, "Yes, that's how we feel, that's what we think, too."

There are other times when I am praying for (in place of) someone else. They are so consumed with whatever is happening in their lives that they cannot give voice to what they are feeling, to the depth of their pain. Or they cannot think clearly. In those moments, I am praying aloud so that they can share in my words.

I give these examples to help us think through what Jesus was saying when he told those listening to not pray on street corners and out in public, but to go home, go into a room, and shut the door. Does this mean that God only hears when no one else can?

Clearly not. There are prayers of Jesus and his followers recorded, which means someone heard.

So here's the core question: *Are we praying for compliments?*

So why do we have to ask (Matthew 6:7-8)

Sometimes I know exactly what our kids need. I can look ahead and know that they will be in *that* situation and will need *that* solution.

I know it. But I may not tell them.

Sometimes they decide to ask ahead of time. We can take care of their need.

Sometimes they come to me at the last minute. Maybe I can help, maybe I can't.

Sometimes they come to me afterwards and say, "I should have asked."

Why do I let them suffer? Do you think I'm a bad parent for not acting even if I'm not asked? Do you think that I should anticipate their every difficulty and even if they forget their homework assignment, should take it to school? Do you think that they will learn anything at all about taking responsibility for paying attention or will they merely take me for granted?

Is it possible that sometimes I know what is going on and choose to wait for them to ask for help?

Is it possible that sometimes they ask for help and set in process the things that will help them and because they don't see what they expect, they keep begging me to do something?

Is it possible that they spend enormous amounts of energy worrying about what I am already taking care of?

Is it possible that my action for their good will happen on my timetable rather than theirs?

Is it possible that what they call “not caring” and what they call “ignoring” and what they call “not listening” and what they call “forever” are none of those things?

And if it is possible that in my wisdom as a dad, I act differently than my children expect but still for their good, isn't it possible God does, too?

Lord's Prayer: Our Father in heaven (Matthew 6:9)

For some people, the beginning of this prayer has to be rough.

To start with, “our Father” brings horrible memories. And the thought, “if God is like that, then I'm not interested.”

As I think about this beginning, however, I realize that Jesus knew.

Jesus knew that some men would be hopelessly cruel to their daughters. He knew that some families would shatter through the selfishness of one or the other or both. He knew that the image of father would be a challenge for many dads. (I think about it sometimes. I realize that the image our kids have of God as father is shaped by their image of Jon as father, and I am chagrined.)

And so Jesus, in his knowledge of what families were going to be like, good and ill, starts this model of prayer by focusing on the closest, dearest, strongest, healthiest, most life-giving, most protection-offering person he knew. His Father in heaven.

Before any requests are made. Before any apologies are offered. Before any transactions are begun, relationship is established.

This is to be a familial relationship, a perfect paternal relationship. Everything you ever wished for a dad to be is being offered at the beginning of this prayer, this conversation.

And if we have questions about starting the conversation with relationship, Jesus uses a story to show what the relationship is like ([Luke 15:19](#)) with a son who left home and messed up and shamed the family and then comes back saying, “‘Father I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father...”

“But the father.”

This is a father who knew exactly what the son had done and wouldn't let him finish the speech. So Jesus says to start with “our *Father*.”

Lord's Prayer: We pray that your name will always be kept holy (6:9)

Father, I realize that I don't know exactly what hallowed means. And so for all the years I've been praying this prayer, I'm not sure I understand, exactly.

So does it mean that you want me to ask *you* to keep your name special and set apart? Does it mean that you want me to affirm that your name is special, to affirm that I don't take lightly the fact that I get to call you Father?

Because I want to affirm that, I really do. But I have to acknowledge that I sometimes take for granted that I'm actually talking to *You*. I mean, I just starting talking as if you aren't *God*.

It's not that you don't want relationship. It's not that you don't invite me to a conversational relationship. It's more that I start talking as if you couldn't do anything about what is going on. Complaining without remembering that I'm not talking to the complaint department, I'm talking to the owner directly. Venting to a friend who has also suffered without remembering that you are the friend with really big muscles. Whining without asking. Asking without believing. Believing without doing. Doing instead of trusting.

There are always shades of not remembering that you are holy, pure, not confined to my motives. And yet, you aren't waiting to trap me in my misstatements, you are wanting to help me remember.

David almost always got this right. In his prayers he would complain or lament or identify the problem, but he would always come back to acknowledging you.

"How long will you forget me Lord" at the beginning of Psalm 13 becomes "Then I will sing to the Lord because he was so good to me."

So help me remember who you are and why that can encourage me.

Amen.

Lord's Prayer: *Your* kingdom (Matthew 6:10)

There are many debates about what the kingdom of heaven means in Matthew, about when it starts, about what Jesus means when he says "repent because the Kingdom is at hand."

I wonder why we wonder so much? Why do we care so much about having exactly the right interpretation?

Is it because we want to be kings of understanding "your kingdom"? Is it because being right will make us special?

—
Jesus, did you know how much we love to be the most right one, the most understanding one, the most humble one?

Of course you knew. Otherwise, you wouldn't have made surrender so high on the list of things to talk to our Father about.

"We pray that your kingdom will come—that what you want will be done here on earth, the same as in heaven."

That's how you told us to pray about kingdom.

—

Here's why I think that he told us to pray that way, and told us to say "we pray" rather than "I pray." He wanted us to be in clusters when we said these words, in community. Like a group of eight or nine people in a living room. And he wanted us to have to talk about God's kingdom coming with people who know how much we want our kingdom, or even my kingdom.

I get pretty confident about my understanding. I can stake out what I think. And then when eight people who know me well are hearing me talk about wanting God's kingdom, there is an instant credibility check.

And when we together are asking that the Father's desire happen here as well as in heaven, we have to look each other in the eye and say, "That means in us, between us, among us, within us."

Not my kingdom. Not our kingdom. *Your kingdom.*

I guess that's pretty clear.

Lord's Prayer: Enough for today (Matthew 6:11)

Sometimes context doesn't matter. Things seem clear by themselves. At face value.

Like a request for bread. What could be more simple? "Give me food today. (Please)."

For the people hearing this prayer for the first time, the request was only partly about the future or about today. It had everything to do with the past.

Israel was in the desert, having left Egypt (with God's assistance). They were, they thought, without food (though they did have flocks of animals with them.)

They fussed about being without food. And God gave them manna. It was some kind of seed or flake or something that could be ground and made into bread. It showed up every day. Well, every day but one every week.

On that day, on the Sabbath day, they didn't get any manna. But on the day before, there was

enough for two days.

Six days out of seven for forty years. It was an incredible number of “every days”. It was an incredible amount of daily bread.

For Israel, wandering in the desert, the prayer that Jesus taught reflected their experience. Every day, each day, the bread for that day and no more. You had to go collect it, but you couldn’t save it.

Every morning there was faith. Every morning there was food.

I wonder if the daily asking was a way to remember complete dependence. I mean, *we* aren’t exactly in the desert. We aren’t exactly in need of daily provision. We have plenty of everything. We could almost ask for bread every two weeks, just as a way to acknowledge, on payday, that we are working hard to earn our daily bread.

For Israel, in the desert, it wasn’t about their great jobs, their hard work. It was about a faithful God daily giving bread.

Lord’s Prayer: That is really hard (Matthew 6:11)

Jesus says that we are to ask God to forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors.

Unless, of course, he says that we are to ask God to forgive our trespasses.

That used to be the clear way to distinguish between low church and high church, by whether we say “debts” or “trespasses”. And, ironically, in the struggle to decide which to say, many people were reminded of the difficulties between debtors and those who trespass against us.

And in the middle of this prayer, while asking for forgiveness, we remember why we need it so much.

Jesus says that there is a relationship between our asking God for forgiveness and us forgiving other people. We are to ask for forgiveness and, it seems, tell God to forgive us in the same way **as** we forgive others.

I once heard someone say that we expect people to respond the way we would respond in the same situation. We use our motives to assess their motives. Thus, people who cheat assume that everyone would cheat. People who don’t take anything seriously assume that everyone is that flexible.

People who choose to hold back forgiveness will assume that God is that way, too.

“I forgive them but I’m watching closely for them to mess us again.”

“I forgive them but I’m keeping track.”

Notice a very careful word choice.

Choose.

Many people struggle to forgive people who have intentionally hurt them deeply. “I’m trying to forgive, but it’s hard,” they say. And then they worry about how this passage, worry that unless they forgive, they will be punished, but not knowing how to forgive.

It’s for us that this prayer exists.

Though he links the two conditionally, he first allows us to ask for forgiveness. As we remember his forgiveness, forgiving becomes easier.

Not easy, but possible.

Lord’s Prayer: Please take care of me (Matthew 6:12-13)

“You aren’t going to leave me, are you?”

When you are getting to know someone too good to be true, you have questions. You acknowledge their greatness. You ask them for help. You acknowledge your weakness.

Then, after all that, as you are starting to relax a bit, you are suddenly seized with fear. What if they aren’t going to stick around? What if they aren’t going to follow through? What if they are going to be like everyone else we have ever known in our lives who sometime, someday, doesn’t come through?

We get so used to people who don’t keep their word, who let us down. We are familiar with the feeling of betrayal, of abandonment, of disappointment. We watch every leader we know prove to be human, at best.

And so, having made all our requests known, we stop and we say

“Don’t lead us into temptation.”

“Do deliver us from evil.”

God, please don’t bring us this far and leave us. Don’t bring us through the week and into the weekend and then leave us alone, facing temptation.

Don’t do to us what you did to your own son.

There it is.

We want to be able to trust God but we somehow can’t. We look at what happens to people who follow him, who even *are* Him, and what we see undermines what we think should happen.

Jesus was led into the desert to be tempted by the devil. By the Spirit. Just two chapters ago. And Jesus survived the direct testing. Now he says, “Ask the Father not to do the first part with you,

and to just do the second part.”

Maybe we don’t have to understand the theology to say these words. Maybe we just have to give voice to our fears.

Fasting (Matthew 6:16-18)

Don’t you love the difference the choice between two words can make?

One word makes things optional. One word makes them expected.

One word makes you think about the perhaps. One word makes you think about the procedure.

One word is about whether. One word is about how.

One word is “if”. One word is “when”.

Jesus talks about fasting in [Matthew 6:16-18](#). He starts this section of his sermon with “When you fast.”

He could have made it completely optional by saying “if”. He could have removed fasting from consideration by not talking about it all (thereby leaving the conversation about fasting up to commentators - “The fact that Jesus didn’t mention fasting suggests that he found it an unimportant element of spiritual life.”)

Instead, fasting shows up three times in Matthew’s account of Jesus’ life. The first time is when Jesus himself fasts for 40 days prior to his temptation. The third time is in [Matthew 9](#) where John’s disciples ask Jesus why both they and the Pharisees fast and Jesus’ disciples don’t. The second time is here where Jesus is talking about how to fast.

Because we are looking at Matthew as kind of a handbook for what it means to be a follower of Jesus, let’s take a look at these three. One tells us that Jesus himself saw value in fasting, particularly before the beginning of his ministry. The third tells us that both groups of super-religious people saw fasting itself as an observable measure of spirituality. In the second Jesus says that if fasting is done for how it looks, then what humans think of you is all it is good for.

Said differently, if you want people to be impressed, then be public about your fasting. If you want God to listen, be incredibly private.

Fasting isn’t supposed to be fun. It’s supposed to be difficult. It’s supposed to be challenged. Intentionally refraining from something that is important to you, which is essential to your well-being, is a difficult thing.

The longer the fast, the harder it is supposed to be. Spending 40 days fasting, as Jesus did, has

to be grueling. Spending three weeks fasting like Daniel did would be challenging. Spending a day without food for many of us triggers headaches.

And with all of that difficulty, Jesus says that when we fast, people shouldn't be able to tell by looking at us.

In that comment, Jesus makes it clear that he knows people inside and out. When most of us are doing something difficult, we like other people to know. When we spent the night not sleeping, we make sure that people understand why we are cranky. We help them to have the appropriate amount of sympathy for us. We often remind people of how busy we are. We frequently help people know our burdens.

And Jesus says, when you are giving up food (or whatever you are fasting from), don't look miserable. (One translation says that the hypocrites "disfigure their faces," an apt description of us when we are trying to look like we are feeling miserable.) Instead, wash your face, comb your hair, look as alert, as happy, as normal as you can.

Will our family know that we are missing a meal? Yes, of course. Will that negate the value? Probably not. Unless we are fasting to impress them.

The hardest part of fasting may be that people won't know. Which is, of course, the point.

Okay. Here's the deal. I want to talk about fasting.

I want to talk about what the reward is.

I want to talk about this incredibly cool image that God paints in [Isaiah](#) 58 about fasting not being about being selfish and simply not eating the food you have, but it's about sharing a meal with people who don't have food.

I would love to consider the irony that a person fasting might actually eat, giving up not food, but reputation to be eating with the people that no one else will eat with.

It's not, according to God, about lying around feeling weak, but it's about actively breaking bonds, taking the time that you would spend on eating and researching injustice or breaking up fights or writing letters to the local foodbank.

It's not about reveling in my ability to choose to not eat but it's about helping people who don't have the freedom to decide anything about anything, the people who are trapped in all kinds of bondage.

I would love to talk about the fact that the people who pursue active fasting are told by God that they can call out to him and he will listen to them. He will hear *them* and will choose to *not* listen to the people who are involved in showy fasting, the kind that gets attention for the suffering

that it inflicts on the faster.

I would love to examine what beside food we could give up, what ways we could pursue justice. I would love to spend time working through all these things.

But I keep needing to look at my email in the odd chance that something will show up. And I keep checking my twitter feed to see if someone responded. And there are so many things I...

Relationship rewards (Matthew 6:20)

“Store up treasure in heaven.”

That’s what Jesus tells us. Don’t spend your energy on stuff that gets eaten up by financial declines so that you panic about how much less you are worth this week than last week.

Because, of course, if your measure of your worth is in your portfolio and your portfolio declines precipitously, then your heart will decline precipitously as well.

Isn’t it intriguing that this image Jesus paints of wealth being devoured rings so true in an economic decline? And isn’t it intriguing how much energy the people in the mirror are putting into thinking about how many more years we are going to have to work before retirement? Isn’t it intriguing how cranky and insecure and strategic we are getting?

And yet, what does it mean to store up treasure in heaven and how does that help now?

If treasures are like rewards, then the first half of Matthew 6 answers that question. Giving, praying, and fasting, done in secret, bring rewards.

What?

You mean that if I look for people in need and help them, that is storing up treasure? But how could that have reward? We are just seeing Jesus, after all (Matthew 25).

You mean that if I am talking with God, that is storing up treasure? But it’s conversation! It is it’s own reward.

You mean that if I am going about fasting with a smile on my face, combating injustice, bringing freedom to trapped people, that is storing up treasure? But it is so fulfilling!

All three of these things that Jesus says are rewarding are rooted in deepening our relationship with God.

I’ve thought of storing up treasure as acquisition. But gold in heaven is the least valuable thing. The conversational relationship is the real treasure.

And it starts now.

Birds and flowers (Matthew 6:25-34)

The daffodils are growing in front of our house. In a month they will be bright yellow. Except for the ones that are white. Except for the ones that are pastel yellow. And there will be more than last year. And we didn't plant the extra ones.

And the finches will be back soon. They will be joining the robins. They will be followed by the hummingbirds. We will feed them. But we can take no credit for them.

When people think of birds and flowers and Jesus, the ornery among us think about how they die, how some of them starve in the winter, how the flowers are often not vivid. We listen to Jesus talking about taking care of flowers and birds, about food and clothing, and we think that he falls short.

But the point that Jesus was making seems to me not about botany or ornithology. He was talking about attention.

What do you invest your attention in?

Jesus suggests some things to not invest it in. Don't invest it in worry. Don't invest it in wondering *whether* God (He does know). Don't invest it in what you have already asked God for (This teaching comes right after having asked God for our daily bread. Having asked for that, Jesus says, don't worry about how the Father will do it).

What do we pay attention to? *What God is doing.*

Jesus says to first seek the Kingdom and the way of living that is found there. Be part of what will last forever, and being dressed in the righteous clothes. And then, Jesus says, the rest will follow. The food and drink and clothing that are needed.

This weekend, ask God what part of his Kingdom he wants you to seek right now.

Today has enough trouble (Matthew 6:34)

I have no clue what will happen today.

I just wanted you to know that.

I spent part of Sunday afternoon at a funeral for a woman who had been married for 65 years, who had Alzheimer's. The pastor started his message with "none of us planned to be here today."

What was interesting for this funeral is that this woman --after being told it would be a "matter of hours" -- lived for several days. The family had been planning on a funeral and couldn't even count on that happening.

I don't mean to be disrespectful at all.

I do, however, want to remind myself that even when we think we know what's coming, we don't. Death happens, or doesn't. Our child gets sick, or doesn't. Our stock crashes, or doesn't.

If we spend all of our time worrying about what might happen or planning as if nothing will happen, we will find that we have wasted a lot of energy that could have been spent on something else.

Like listening to the person talking to us right now.

Like asking for wisdom for the project that is happening right now.

Like not procrastinating on writing that tough email because of our fear of what might happen.

Jesus said, "seek the kingdom." In the next breath he says, "don't worry about tomorrow."

Today has its own trouble. Today has its own opportunity to watch God work. Today has its own invitation to ask God to let us be part of his work and his kingdom and his caring and his compassion and his solutions and his hope.

Interestingly, the trusting and following and obeying that we do today may well eliminate whatever it was that we were worrying might happen tomorrow.

So when you read this, whenever it is, do this:

"God, let me see you today."

The window or the mirror (Matthew 7:1-2)

I want to write about judging.

I want to write without being judgmental.

I sit here creating examples of extreme finickiness and then think, "but isn't that being judgmental, reflecting my own bias against finickiness?"

And I am convicted. And I save the draft and start over.

Because [Jesus says](#) that the standard that I use to critique you is the one that will be used by God to examine me.

The temptation, of course, is to be incredibly flexible in hopes that God will be accepting of me. "If I don't criticize laziness, he'll accept my laziness." "If I don't criticize anger, he'll let me be angry." Unfortunately, that approach is backwards. It assumes that I can somehow trick God.

The better approach is to start the judging with me. "God tells me not to be angry." "God tells me to be loving." "God tells me to be gentle."

There is a place for identifying injustice, for proclaiming freedom for captives. That process, mentioned often, involves making judgments about acceptable and unacceptable behavior. But the starting place for such judgments is always in the mirror, rather than in the window.

Before I talk about your lies, for example, have I been honest with God and myself about my motives for pointing out your lies, about my actions in reporting to my professor that I had read the religious ethics book that I hadn't read, about my unwillingness to be honest about why work isn't getting done, about the wedding ceremony income that I didn't bother to report to the IRS in 2004, about the amount of time that it really takes to do projects.

Have I been honest with God?

Then, having been honest with God, will I be likely to judge or be more likely to invite you to freedom?

A sense of humor (Matthew 7)

We are too serious.

Okay, so maybe some of us laugh sometimes. And some of us laugh all the time. And some of us frown most of the time. But most of the time most people have some amount of laughter.

Until we pick up the Bible, that is. Then we get serious. Too serious. We look at words and sentences and paragraphs as we do everything we can to find all the meaning we can. We want to get it right. And in the process of serious analysis, we miss the fun stuff. And there is fun stuff.

For example, Jesus wants to help an audience understand the problem in judging. ([Matthew 7](#)) He wants to help them make no mistake about how silly it is to try to be God, to try to be the one who decides who is right and who is wrong. So he creates a picture, one that he would know well (Being a carpenter and all).

Imagine a guy in the shop. He's working along and ends up with a piece of sawdust in his eye. It hurts. It's a hassle. He asks his buddy for help. Up to this point, the buddy has been bent over, as if he's looking for something. And now he turns and we clearly see the baseball bat in his eye. Now, it's not a bat, it's a branch. No wait, it's a log. There is a log in the other guy's eye.

And as the 2nd guy approaches the 1st guy (in their mind's eye), people start laughing. It's more like the Three Stooges than a sermon. This is completely ridiculous. Everyone is laughing at the image of a man trying to look around a bat.

And then Jesus says "hypocrites."

And suddenly, we all get it.

On hogs and dogs (Matthew 7:6)

As much as we work to understand and explain what Jesus said, we need to be honest: sometimes he wasn't clear.

At times it was purposeful. He even says that he is speaking obscurely at times. However, in the middle of a fairly clear sermon, when he seems to be trying to be clear, he says this:

"Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces." [[Matthew 7:6](#)]

We read it and say, "What?!"

He has just been talking about not judging. He just talked about taking the baseball bat out of your own eye before worrying about the splinter in someone else's eye. And then he calls people dogs and hogs.

That seems pretty judgmental to me.

I'm pretty sure that the argument, "Jesus can say that because he knows people" doesn't apply. He's telling *us* to identify them.

What is likely, according to commentators, is that Jesus is offering a cautionary note to his judgment words. While we are not to be quick to judge, we have to acknowledge that some people are intentionally destructive. They choose to wreck good stuff, to destroy, to bully, to trample.

Be careful, he says, what you give to destructive people.

But what does that mean? Does it mean not to give too much time to people who are more interested in consuming than conversing? Does it mean don't give leadership to those who will use it to wreck? Does it mean not to give clear explanations of the gospel to those who use it to destroy?

For me, one day, it meant telling a man named Harold to leave the church grounds. He was trampling people.

No questions asked.

Waiting is hard (Matthew 7:7-12)

We all have stories about God not answering our prayer. We asked for help on the test. We failed. We asked for healing for the child. She died. We asked "why?" We didn't hear anything.

Given our experience, many of us read these words that Jesus said and we cringe:

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will

be opened. [[Matthew 7:7-8](#)]

And so we learn to use qualifiers. Or we don't pray at all. But what if Jesus actually was telling the truth? What if "everyone" really means "every one?" What if every time we ask we receive an answer but we aren't listening?

A 2-year-old is riding in a stroller through a store asking for that. And that. And that. If the parent keeps moving past all of the items, we may get upset.

Except the store isn't Toys'R'Us, it is Lowe's. And the aisle isn't toys, it's pesticides. And the quiet parent already told the child that they were fixing the sandbox.

With focus, the parent gets to the bags of sand. Which are not at all exciting to a 2-year-old. The journey through the rest of the story is loud and the ride home is sleepy, after the tears subside. After a nap, during which the sand goes in the box, the child is taken outside and placed in the sand, where the parent also sits.

The requests of a 2-year-old for what would kill are often refused.

The requests of a 2-year-old for what gives life are often granted.

But two-year olds can't read the labels, don't know the plans.

They must trust.

"But I'm not a 2-year-old," we say. "And besides, comparing people to God isn't appropriate anyway."

Really? Are you sure?

Because that's exactly what Jesus does to help us understand how God listens to us.

He's talking to the crowd on the hillside. He's been talking to everyone, but now he speaks directly to the guys.

"How many of you, when your kid asks you to pass the bread, would hand him a stone?"

Immediately, some of us imagine teasing our kids that way. We can see ourselves tossing a tennis ball instead of a roll while at a picnic. But then we think about when our child is actually hungry, actually in need of food. We move away from teasing then. We get serious. We pass the bread.

"Or if he asks for a fish, would you really hand him a snake?"

Not a plastic snake, not a tease. A real snake, something deadly rather than life-giving. When we hear about parents who do this, we are horrified. We can't imagine.

"If you, being evil, do good things for your kids, how much more will your heavenly Father..."

And there are faces lighting up all across the hillside. There are moments of realization.

“You mean, this fierce love I have for my children, this sense of protection, this desire for their good, this willingness to scold to save them this willingness to absorb pain so they only feel some, this celebration of what they can do well, this encouragement in difficulty, all of this that I feel for my children, that’s how God loves me?”

Yes.

Jesus knew the fierce love His Father and his stepfather had for him. He knew one could illustrate the other.

Even today.

Wanna do something about it? (Matthew 7:12)

All the rules. All the warnings. All the cautionary tales. All the words. Everything that his audience had been learning since birth, Jesus said, could be summed up in one phrase. We call it the golden rule. We make it a wall plaque. We teach it to little children to train them to share.

“So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” [[Matthew 7:12](#)]

This is a summary sentence, not just of the Law and the Prophets, but of everything Jesus has been saying for the past three chapters.

You really don’t want people to hate you, right? (murder). You really don’t want people to pick out one thing about you and desire that thing rather than you, do you? (lust). You really don’t want people taking your clothing or making you serve them.

What you want is to be loved. What you want is to be respected. What you want is be a person, to matter. And when we don’t want those things, it is often because they have been, one way or another, beaten from our souls.

And, Jesus says, that standard? Use it.

But there is something missing from this sentence. We think that it needs a little “and they will treat you the same” clause. Because we want to know that if we respect, we’ll be respected. If we love, we will be loved. If we listen, we will be listened to.

That clause isn’t here. Because Jesus doesn’t make any claims about what *they* will do if we do this. He doesn’t offer any manipulation principles. He just invites obedience.

Gates (Matthew 7:13-14)

I have written elsewhere about [deliberate practice](#). Simply, it is choosing to work in a focused

way on the weakest parts of what you are best at. Such specific work can, I think, apply in following Jesus.

It came to mind when looking at what Jesus said about gates and roads.

“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” [[Matthew 7:13-14](#)]

Lots of people talk about following, but not many follow through. Many of us talk about what we ought to do, but few people actually do those things. Many people lay their hand on the latch, but few lift it.

I’m pretty sure that Jesus isn’t talking about artificially narrowed gates, those with narrowly defined boundaries of human rules that count. He doesn’t need to. He has already clearly identified edges that talk about hate and lust and lies and religious ostentatiousness and praying only for an audience and ungraceful judging. Those edges make the gate pretty narrow.

And yet, those edges make for a sense of hope. Treating people that lovingly, loving God that simply, bring a sense of clarity. We can’t measure up without asking for help. Jesus is available to help. To enter the gate, to walk that path, we have to give up our ability to try to live successfully with unmeetable standards, but in the giving up, living becomes relationship.

It takes consistent, deliberate choices. Choosing to follow, choosing to focus, choosing to refine that part today, this part tomorrow.

But choosing isn’t easy. It’s easier to just do it all.

Jesus seems to suggest that’s destruction.

Aftermath (Matthew 7:15-23)

Some people look spiritual for all the wrong reasons. Jesus singles them out in [Matthew 7:15-23](#). He calls them “false prophets.” Why do they choose to be false? Because some people trust spiritual-looking people for all the wrong reasons. Jesus offers a couple warnings near the end of his lesson.

1. People can look like good people *because* they are bad people. My guess is that they are very good at the externals of looking like sheep. Their credentials are perfect. The costume fits well. They are better at being sheep than most sheep. But inside they aren’t just bad sheep. They are wolves.
2. Don’t look at what teachers say, Jesus says, look at the results of what they say. Shifting

metaphors, he suggests that any tree can glue the right kind of leaves on, but only apple trees can naturally grow apples. He will take this image further in John 15 where he talks about us being branches attached to his vine. The fruit will be Jesus' fruit.

I struggle with this fruit-bearing requirement. I wonder, often, whether I invite people to say "good thought" or "that hurts" instead of helping them change from the inside. I know that both compliments and change can happen, but I want always to be aware of helping people take the next step, to think about the next lesson, to ask Jesus the next question.

It's interesting how concerned Jesus is with actions, with behavior, with obedience. Here he says,

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."

And he will reinforce this message at the end of the book of Matthew (28:20):

"Teach them to obey everything I have commanded."

To implement this idea of looking for results, look at what follows behind teachers and preachers and each other and yourself. Are there baskets of fruit or sheep carcasses?

Just one thing (Matthew 7:24)

Many people heard many things in church last Sunday. Many words, many challenges, many opportunities. Many invitations, many explanations, many ideas.

All of the things we heard can confuse our ability to obey. Every discussion is an opportunity for confusion as well as clarity. All of the information can become noise.

However, today we have the opportunity to pick one thing and do it.

Just one. Out of all the messages, just one.

It's not that they don't all have value. It's that Jesus talked about how to build, and as I understand the process of building, I think it starts with doing one thing at a time. Jesus says,

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock" [[Matthew 7:24](#)].

A builder adds only one board at a time, one brick at a time. A builder fastens each piece to the previous piece, providing great stability. It isn't enough to build an inventory of boards, piles of brick. A full warehouse is not a finished house.

Obedience is what builds on a solid foundation. Doing what Jesus said to do. Listening and then acting. Go back to Sunday. All of the things we heard are piled in the warehouse, available, but not

used. Our responsibility is to grab one board and put it in place.

Trusting was one of the things I heard the Sunday before I wrote this. Trusting was one of the things I taught. Trusting that maybe I don't have to keep all the possibilities in the air, doing none of them. Trusting that maybe, by picking one and doing it, I can learn how to obey, a skill that Jesus says is like building on a rock.

But they all look so possible.

Sandstorm (Matthew 7:24-27)

If the wise are those who build on rock, the foolish are those who build on sand.

Sand shifts. Sand moves. Sand is a million pieces of rock. Sand is all the same substance as the rock but in pieces too small to give any support. Sand is a collection of completely independent individuals. Sand is more comfortable for sleeping than rock. Sand is easier to mold into shapes, which are less durable than rock. Sand is great for playing. Sand is good for polishing things smooth. Sand is part of glass. Sand drifts.

Rock is heavy. Rock is durable. Rock doesn't get blown away. Rock takes a lot to move. Rock isn't very flexible. Rock is connected. Rock isn't very comfortable. Rock can be carved but not molded. Rock can be polished.

Sometimes we take in thousands of pieces of stuff or we look for answers from lots of people and we pile them up like sand. We move them around til they conform to our likes and dislikes. We add some water so that the pieces will stick and look like something solid.

Sometimes we spend a lot of time creating the appearance of obedience. We build a structure that looks the same as all the rest of the structures around. But under the surface, where no one can see, there isn't much that is solid.

Whatever sand is good for, supporting a structure isn't one of those things. Which is why Jesus used it as an example of a foolish place to build a house. The example was clear to everyone listening.

Sometimes, if we just did what Jesus told us to do, we'd be a lot more stable. But it seems harder to build something that will last. Forever.

Epilogue

We've spent more than 12,000 words discussing what Jesus said in 2,500. That's five times as many words. And I've skimmed over many things. So go back and read what Jesus said. And then,

together, let's live it.